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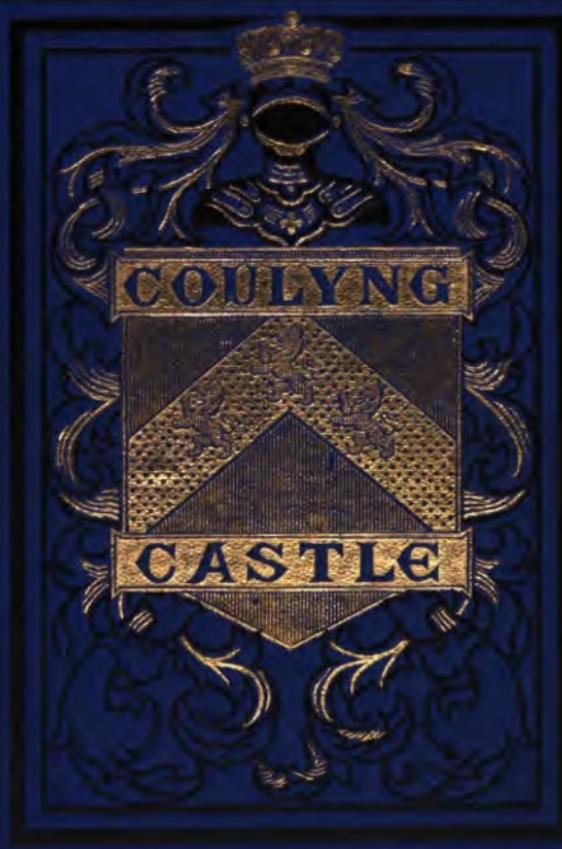
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"She stood in the doorway of the tower, the flickering torches behind casting into strong relief her stately winged head-dress and lovely dark face."—*Page 156.*

COULYNG CASTLE;

OR,

A KNIGHT OF THE OLDEN DAYS.

BY

AGNES GIBERNE,

AUTHOR OF "THE CURATE'S HOME," "FLOSS SILVERTHORN,"
"THE MISTS OF THE VALLEY," ETC.

Ad finem fidelis.

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CONTENTS.

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	GYTHA	1
II.	THE BANQUET	12
III.	OLD LONDON	25
IV.	JOHN BADBY	36
V.	GYTHA'S NEW HOME	46
VI.	THE CASTLE GARDEN	59
VII.	SIR ROGER ACTON	72
VIII.	THE CASTLE SUPPER	84
IX.	FAILURE	94
X.	AT VARIANCE	106
XI.	CHAMBERS AND PASSAGES	116
XII.	THE KING'S PRIVY CHAMBER	129
XIII.	MARGARET'S CONFESSION	138
XIV.	THE KNIGHT'S RETURN	152
XV.	CITATIONS	161
XVI.	BIDDING FAREWELL	170
XVII.	A PRICK	178
XVIII.	THE TRIAL	187
XIX.	CONDEMNED	199
XX.	SICKNESS	207
XXI.	STERBOROUGH CASTLE	213

CHAPTER		PAGE
XXII. ST. GILES' FIELD	-	224
XXIII. WHAT TO DO?	-	233
XXIV. A STERBOROUGH CASTLE BANQUET	-	244
XXV. FURTHER DOINGS	-	253
XXVI. THE LITTLE OLD MANOR	-	263
XXVII. AN AWAKENING	-	274
XXVIII. A DUNGEON	-	284
XXIX. VICTORIOUS	-	295
XXX. THE CLOSED VISOR	-	304
XXXI. GYTHA'S MOTHER	-	314
XXXII. TAKEN	-	322
XXXIII. ANOTHER BATTLE FOUGHT	-	330
XXXIV. ENDINGS	-	340

PREFACE.

A FEW words of introduction and explanation are required by this tale of the olden time.

Sir John Oldcastle, Lord Cobham, is a name concerning which many strange misconceptions have arisen ; and in the course of research into the details of his life, I soon discovered that small reliance was to be placed on the brief notices of him, in most histories of our day. A well-known writer has indeed been at pains to clear his memory from certain unjust imputations ; but apart from this instance, scarcely one modern historian, amongst those to which I had access, has failed to make more or less of confusion between Sir John Oldcastle himself, and his wife's grandfather, John, Lord Cobham, to whose title and estates he succeeded, in her right.

The confusion is of course enhanced by the fact of both men bearing the same Christian name ; both being strong and resolute characters ; and both having distinguished themselves as lusty warriors of their day. So

far does the difficulty reach, that one historian, after warning against this common mistake, actually falls himself into the very same error, only a few pages later. But for the help of an old folio History of Kent, containing the pedigree of the Cobham family, with exact dates of births, marriages, and deaths, I too should have found the tangle past my power to unravel.

As concerns the actual life of Sir John Oldcastle, my wish has been to adhere as closely as possible throughout to matters of fact ; with only the necessary use of imaginary details to fill up the hard historic outline. Even these have not been equally needed in all parts. In Sir John's private interview with the king—as also in the scene of John Badby's martyrdom—fancy has thus had some scope, in giving conversational details, though with no divergence from such particulars as have been handed down, or from the known views of the royal Henry. But in the matter of the trial, there is given word for word what was actually said and done, as reported by Bishop Bale ; my chief concern having been to curtail the good prelate's very lengthy narrative. With respect to Sir John's concealment, both in West England and in Wales, the paucity of particulars has compelled the greater use of imagination ; nevertheless, that he was thereabouts in hiding, was thus long sheltered, and was thus finally betrayed and taken, are historical facts.

The most difficult portion of his life to treat satisfac-

torily, is the affair of Ficket's Field, at St. Giles. Whether or no he was really concerned therein ; whether or no plans of rebellion were really harboured ; whether or no he was really present ; these are questions hotly discussed. Bishop Bale and others are vehement in his defence, while certain old Roman Catholic chroniclers show themselves equally vehement in attack. Some few treat the matter in a more moderate spirit ; but no positive decision can well be arrived at without further evidence. The belief to which I inclined, after much doubting, was that Sir John certainly appears to have had for a while something of a leaning towards the idea of a Lollard rising ; but that no proof whatever is deducible of his presence in Ficket's Field ; also that if any such scheme were for a while in his mind, he must before long have given it up. Otherwise it seems singular that he should have made no further efforts during his lonely banishment in Wales, when so many were devoted to him and his cause. One of the old chroniclers does indeed assert that during his concealment in England, when he was chased from one hiding-place, certain warlike articles, including a banner with a suspicious device, were found left behind. But this seems unsupported elsewhere ; and in those days of war and chivalry might have meant nothing ; therefore I have made no use of the fact, if fact it be. No doubt the king honestly believed in Sir John's rebellious intentions, but the king might very easily have been de-

ceived, and it was in the interest of many so to deceive him.

In justice to King Henry V. it ought to be stated that his principles appear to have been steadily opposed to the persecutions which took place in his reign. He was overruled by the stern and relentless prelates with whom he had to do, and many may be disposed to blame him for his weakness in so yielding. There is no doubt however, that his defective title to the throne greatly lessened his powers of resistance, by making the support of these powerful churchmen an all-important matter. This, if not an excuse, is at least an explanation ; and it is only fair to exculpate him as far as possible from participation in the persecuting spirit of his day.

The names, titles, and relationships, of the Lady Joan of Cobham, her daughter, and her successive husbands ; of Dame Alianore, Reginald and Margaret ; of Eleanor Culpepper, Arnold and Eleanor Savage, and Thomas Brooke, are strictly correct ; but respecting their characters and their individual histories, I have been able to discover nothing whatever. The only exceptions to this utter blank are,—first, the fact of the after-restoration to Dame Joan Cobham of her alienated estates, from which may be augured certain probable facts concerning her religious views or profession ; and secondly, some singular statements in history, with regard to Dame Alianore Cobham having been in later years accused of witchcraft, and of

an attempt to destroy her second husband. This, however, is altogether apart from my tale.

In addition to historical accuracy, my aim has been, as far as lay in my power, to present a truthful picture of castle-life and manners in the olden time. I am but too well aware of the extreme difficulty of avoiding mistakes, and if any very palpable anachronisms should have crept into the following pages, I can only plead guilty beforehand, offering in extenuation the assurance that I have at least done the best in my power.

A few words about the language employed. Some readers may be struck by a certain amount of incongruity between the quotations from Wickliffe's Bible—the only version from which I could reasonably quote—and the more modern style of conversation. Two extremes, however, lay open to me :—first, to modernize the spelling, and in some measure the words of the said quotations, thus making them harmonize with the conversations; secondly, to make my heroes and heroines converse in a language corresponding to the quotations. The objection to the first plan, is that it would have greatly detracted from the interest of these quaint and genuine specimens of old English. The objection to the second, apart from the difficulty of carrying it out, is that it would have rendered my book virtually unreadable to nine people in ten. I have therefore followed a medium course; preserving the quotations unaltered,

PREFACE.

and adopting a style of conversation, which, if nothing more than a compromise, bears yet, I hope, sufficient resemblance to that spoken in the past, to give some air of *vrai-semblance* to the whole.

I need only add that it would be hardly necessary to offer the names of the numerous authorities referred to. Between thirty and forty volumes, containing passages which bore relation either to Lord Cobham or to his times, have claimed a share of attention. I merely mention this fact, for the assurance of my readers that at least I have not taxed their kind patience by a hasty or careless composition.

AGNES GIBERNE.

COULYNG CASTLE.

CHAPTER I.

GYTHA.

BETWEEN four and five hundred years ago there stood a quaint little old manor-house, surrounded by wall and watery moat, almost within the far-reaching shadows of the stately Malvern hills.

A draw-bridge crossed the moat, and from the battlemented gateway of the small gatehouse, the somewhat rusty teeth of an aged portcullis grinned threateningly down. The Manor-house itself, however, was not built round a courtyard, after the prevailing fashion of those days. It had probably been erected about half a century earlier, and its architecture was of the simplest description. Still the overhanging roofs and pointed gables looked prettily picturesque among the bright spring green of surrounding trees ; and the heavy oaken door, within its massive wooden porch, seemed to breathe defiance upon any unwelcome visitor. Only, whoever came in the guise of a guest was welcome, for those were the days of true and boundless hospitality. Any man in search of the said hospitality might enter freely without let or hindrance.

From the front door a passage passed straight through to the back of the house, dividing it into two distinct portions. On the left were the kitchen, the offices, and the stables. To the right stood the hall, occupying nearly all that half of the building, but with one small room behind, originally a bedchamber, and now transformed into a sort of semi-parlour, thus keeping pace with the march of improvements in the day. A small staircase outside the house, fully exposed to wind and rain, led to the two bedchambers in the upper storey.

One bright February morning in the year 1410, the good knight, Sir William Cheyne, and his lady, possessors of this little domain, had retired somewhat hastily to the inner room, after partaking of the usual early dinner. The men and maidens of the household, having finished their share of the meal, were now employed in clearing away the remains.

It was a right busy scene which the old hall presented. Although the superintending eye of the lady herself was absent, yet no loitering was permitted by her deputy, Mistress Anne Tufton—a most worthy female of middle age, who, albeit of somewhat lower rank, had through long service and unswerving devotion attained to a standing of both friendship and authority in the household. The plate was cleaned till it shone like glass, and was restored to the closet. The dishes were washed and put away upon the shelves. The thick coarse bread trenchers, which it was not the custom in Sir William Cheyne's household to dispose of as eatables after using as plates, were flung into the alms-basket, along with a goodly supply of other remnants. The fine long white table-cloths, homespun by the fair hands of the Lady Cheyne herself, were folded up and taken away. The benches were pushed against the wall ; as was likewise the one massive

old oaken chair, with a straight back and no arms, in which the knight and his lady were wont to sit together at meal times—very easily, since it equalled in width two ordinary modern chairs placed side by side. Lastly, the table itself was taken to pieces, the boards and trestles being restored, each to its own proper resting-place.

During these varied operations,—not only of daily, but of twice daily performance,—a young maiden, whose air and dress alike bespoke her to be of gentle birth, stood near the great fireplace with folded hands, looking quietly on the busy scene. She wore a kirtle of striped Flemish cloth, over a *pelisson*, or under-skirt, lined and bordered with brown fur. A neat green velvet hood confined the dark hair which just showed from beneath it, in marked contrast with her ivory fairness of complexion and black-lashed deep-grey eyes.

“Verily, Gytha,” said Mistress Anne Tufton, with some sharpness, “I marvel much what thy lady-mother would say, were she present this instant, to see thee idling away thy time in this fashion, forsooth.”

“It meseemeth, Mistress Tufton, that little or nought remaineth to be done, ye have all worked in such hearty wise,” the girl answered, slowly lifting her large eyes to the other’s face with a singular air of proud yet complete submission.

“Thou hadst best hie thee to thy spinning, an nought else remaineth,” said Anne Tufton decidedly. “‘Tis small thanks to thee, an the work be done. Think’st thou such idleness will be permitted thee when thou goest into noble service with some courtly dame,—as thou hadst gone ere now but for thy lady-mother’s rare tenderness and indulgence towards thee? Soothly and e’en she can scarce defer the matter much longer,—neither will she!” muttered the good woman, in a lower tone.

"I love not service," sighed Gytha, a shadow coming over her fair brow. "I love better to be reading of Master Wickliffe's books, and other writings. Oh, I would I had lived in Master Wickliffe's days, and might have beholden his face. 'Tis a weariness to be ever sewing and spinning and doing of embroidery, like as thou tellest me the damoiselles must do in all such noble households."

"Nay; I say not they do lack pastimes and recreations in full plenty," said Anne Tufton, shaking her head. "It may be, e'en too much of that same. Certes, 'tis a gay and wilful age, and damoiseaux and damoiselles alike have nought to stuff their silly heads, but gauds and new French fineries."

"Nay; I have nought to do with fineries," said Gytha. "I care not for the like."

"Thou!" repeated her monitress. "Verily thy little head is filled with nought but clerkly accomplishments, fitter for them that do preach and teach than for a wench like thee. Thou hast yet many a thing of another sort to learn."

"Methinks such be the hardest of all," said Gytha sorrowfully.

"And thou art wasting thy moments now, as thou wouldst not dare do in our dame's presence. Hie thee to thy spinning, Gytha, and delay not."

"Nay, but Mistress Tufton—sweet dear Dame Tuft," pleaded the girl coaxingly, using the baby title she had been wont to lisp in her childish days, and venturing still a measure of resistance which truly she would never have dared, had her "indulgent" mother been present; "nay, but dear Dame Tuft, my fingers be sore weary, for madame, my mother, hath kept me to my needle this morn, from early dawn even till dinner-hour. Will't not

please thee that I fetch the Gospels, and read thee as thou workest?"

"I would I could deem thine offer were true thoughtfulness for my welfare, and not indulgence of thine own idle inclinations," said Anne Tufton severely. "Truly we cannot have over much of those same Gospels. Nevertheless the Gospel reading, and the daily work, hath each its proper time and place, and I have many things I fain must do. Thou wilt get thee to thy spinning and say no more, or 'twill be worse for thee."

Gytha sighed, and moved across the room with lagging steps, aware that further remonstrance was useless, and would only entail punishment. But at this moment the end door opened, and a voice said—

"Come hither, Gytha. We have somewhat to tell thee, child."

Gytha responded to the call eagerly, though her springing step slackened again into a very sober and demure carriage by the time she reached her parents' presence.

The chamber—parlour—spare bedroom,—or whatever it might be called, seeing it partook of the characteristics of all three,—was small and barely furnished, though not more barely than was usual in those days. The bedstead, a very simple piece of furniture in itself, stood in a recess, with heavy red curtains hanging from the ceiling, which would almost have sufficed to conceal it altogether in the day-time. Lady Cheyne, however, liked to make display of her own handiwork, in the shape of the elaborate silken coverlet within, so that the curtains were never closely drawn. There was only one chair, of course,—*that* was rather a luxury in a Manor of this age and standing. There were also a form, and a hutch or coffer which served for a seat, and a pair of trestles standing beside a board, wherewith a table when requisite could

be made, and a cupboard, and a fire-place, and two brass dogs, with a large log lying across them, ready to make a blaze if needed.

Dame Cheyne sat in the chair, and her husband upon the coffer by her side. The lady was very like her daughter. She had just Gytha's delicate form and features, and fair complexion, and calm grey eyes, with such long silken lashes. Only the dark brown hair was pulled back and completely hidden under a close cloth cap, from which a white wing extended stiffly on either side. She wore a gown of green cloth, faced with rabbit-skin fur, the open sleeves being lined with the same; the skirt long, and the body fitting closely.

Sir William Cheyne, in a long blue tunic, and tight black hosen, and a fur-lined mantle thrown over his shoulders, was a stalwart-looking knight of middle age, with a strong stern face, and yet much good humour of expression. He held out his hand and drew Gytha forward a step, as she stood meekly in front of her parents.

"What think'st thou, Gytha, we be about for to tell thee?" he asked.

"Sir, I wis nought," responded Gytha timidly.

"I fear me Gytha's heart will rebel," said Lady Cheyne. "Yet it must be—and the sooner the better now, mayhap."

Gytha's lips moved entreatingly. She dared not speak unless addressed.

"What is thine age now, Gytha?" inquired Sir William.

"Sir, ere Michaelmas next will close my sixteenth year," said poor Gytha, trembling at the thought of what was coming.

"Sixteen! nay, thou art running on apace. What think'st thou, Gytha, is the usual age when damsels of gentle birth take service in noble households?"

"Methinks it varies, my father." But Gytha's voice faltered, and her lips grew white.

"Thou wilt like it, child, when once thou art there," he said kindly. "Nay—say what thou wilt, only look not quite so woful and downcast, poor little one."

"If I may truly say my thought, sir—then what need I of better service or higher training than that which my mother giveth unto me?" asked Gytha.

"Thou know'st nought about the matter, child," said Lady Cheyne. "It behoveth thee to receive the training due to thy birth, and future settlement suited to thy rank. 'Tis for thy welfare, child, that I part with thee thus willingly."

"Question us what thou wilt, Gytha," said the knight kindly, reading an agony of suspense in the young face before him.

"Will my home be in a Catholic household, my father?" asked Gytha.

"Nay, truly—and there, as thou wittest well, thou hast lighted upon the one impediment which hath caused long delay hitherto. But thy mother hath made up her mind at length to the long journey and great distance for thee, and all else is as best we could have desired. Thou wilt be well content to find thee a home with thy brother's foster-father."

"I am in no wise content to leave mine own home, sir," said Gytha sorrowfully. "But if it needs must be, I would fain be with my brother, though I ken him little, nor his ways, since these many years we have been parted."

"'Tis scarce two years since Sir John wedded the Lady Cobham, and but three years ere that when thou and thy brother were together," said Sir William. "Thou hast not of a surety forgotten him?"

"Nay; but Alfgar and I were but children, five years

since," said Gytha sedately. "He was ever for frightening of me with his dagger and his lance, till Sir John did right sharply chide him for his lack of chivalry."

"Methinks thou wilt scarce recognise the unchivalrous page in the baron's trusty esquire," said Sir William, smiling. "Lord Cobham—albeit his old name of Sir John Oldcastle liketh me the better of the two—but Lord Cobham deemeth right well of thy brother, Gytha. He saith he hath scarce ever seen one so young of more hopeful promise."

"Then will I gladly be proud of him, and trust me unto his protection," said Gytha quietly.

"Thou wilt find better protection than that of the squire, in that of the knight himself," said Sir William. "Lord Cobham is alike thy brother's foster-father, and thy father's sworn brother-at-arms. Thou hast not forgotten him, Gytha, these five years?"

"I love him well," said Gytha earnestly.

"And well may'st, for he is worthy," said Sir William. "A faithful Gospeller, and a true servant of God and of the king, and a noble knight of chivalry, is he."

"Thou wilt live in a stately castle, Gytha," said Dame Cheyne's silver tones. "'Twas built in the reign of his late majesty, King Richard, by the late Lord John Cobham, grandfather of the baroness whom Sir John Oldcastle hath wedded. Sir John is himself her fourth husband, and, I doubt me little, the best among them all. Thou wilt be her faithful little *chambrière*, my Gytha, even as thy brother is faithful and dutiful esquire unto her lord; and thou wilt strive to fulfil the duties of thine office, as it behoveth thee to do."

Poor Gytha hung her head, and murmured, "I will truly make endeavour, madame. And is the Lady Cobham a Gospeller likewise?"

"Nay, I can scarce say she hath come boldly forth, for the one thing or the other; yet, doubtless, she hath the right inclinations. And the Gospel will ever be a free book in Sir John Oldcastle's household. Thou wilt never cease to read it, Gytha?"

"Madame, I would sooner die," said Gytha, with a calm resolution singular in so young a girl.

"It may be things will e'en come to that pass ere many years be flown," said Sir William soberly. "The clergy be verily stirring up the king to hot opposition against all faithful Lollards. 'Tis not ten years since the death of the priest, Sir William Sautre; and he, if our first martyr, is scarce like to be the last among us. Master Wickliffe himself had died again and again but for the mighty protection of his noble patron, the Duke of Lancaster. But thou wilt be safe in the household of Sir John Oldcastle, if thou art safe anywhere."

"He is a friend unto the Prince," said Lady Cheyne.

"Ay, truly; it meseemeth that the Prince loveth him like to an elder brother. Sir John saith the prince hath marvellous gracious and lovable dispositions, and a most knightly spirit, though once in a while he giveth the rein to youthful wildness. He saith that the folks who know him not do marvellously exalt his follies; but that they who do know him can better weigh his merits."

"And Coulyng Castle is far distant from here," said Gytha, more interested just then in her own future prospects than in the character of Prince Henry.

"'Tis close to the city of Rochester, in the county of Kent. Didst not know that?" asked Sir William, smiling.

Malvern and Rochester were, to all intents and purposes, farther apart in those days, than London and St. Petersburg in these.

"I know it e'en too well, sir," Gytha answered sadly.
"I would it were nearer."

"Nay, nay; thou wilt like it well when once thou art there," said Sir William again. "Hast aught else to question us?"

"I would fain know how soon I will have to part"— faltered Gytha.

"'Tis somewhat hastily arranged; but an thou didst not travel now, we might await long without opportunity," said Lady Cheyne. "Sir John Oldcastle abideth even now in Hereford, and in three days will journey hitherward, and sleep a night in our humble dwelling, on his homeward road. Thou wilt make the journey with him, Gytha."

Three days! Only three days more, before she must leave, once and probably for ever, her childhood's home!

It was almost more than she could bear. For a minute, as she stood with her head bent down, and her fingers wrung together, it seemed to Gytha that her heart-strings must surely break beneath the pressure. But the habitual awe and reverence, felt in those days by children towards their parents, checked any outward demonstration of grief, though her whitened cheek and quivering lip told plainly what she felt.

"How wilt thou be pleased, Gytha, to have a young companion with thee, for to wile the tedium of the way?" asked Sir William. "Hast ever heard of the Cobhams of Sterborough?"

Gytha mastered her agitation by a strong effort sufficiently to make answer—

"I have heard, sir, that they be near of kin with the Cobhams of Cobham."

"'Tis another branch of the selfsame noble family—cousins by some degrees removed. The young damoi-

selle Margaret de Cobham, whose brother hath succeeded unto the lordship of Sterborough, hath for many months past been in this county ; and, having now ended her sojourn, will journey back with thee. How lik'st thou that, little Gytha ? ”

Gytha dutifully answered, that she had no doubt she would enjoy the companionship much.

“ And now perchance thou wouldest fain go and con the matter over with thyself,” said Lady Cheyne, indulgent to her daughter’s threatening tears. “ We will speak further to thee anon.”

Gytha made her reverence, and was kissed upon the cheek by either parent. Then she quietly retreated from the room.

The hall was busy and bustling as usual. Gytha went slowly through with downcast eyes, seeing and hearing nothing. Hall, passage, front-door, and courtyard, were each passed in turn ; and she never paused till she had reached the very farthest limits of the little flower-garden, where it was bounded by the outer moat. And there she sat down on the grass and looked back at the house she had left.

“ Three days yet,” she murmured. “ Only three ! O my mother ! it is sorely hard thus to quit for ever all I love ! I ne like not this service of noble dames, nor the society of proud young *chambrières*. Oh, I would I were a clerk, and might spend my life in reading of books, and never go from mine own home.”

And then poor little Gytha put her head down upon her fur-bordered sleeve, and cried long and softly and bitterly for the partings which lay before her.

CHAPTER II.

THE BANQUET.

THE last day had come—all too quickly for Gytha—and on the early morrow she would leave her home.

Sir John Oldcastle and his retinue were expected to arrive in time for the usual five o'clock supper; and as, of course, so distinguished a guest must be treated to as much of a banquet as possible, little leisure could be found that day for useless lamentings. As soon as the early dinner was over, preparations for supper began. During many an hour following, the fair hands of Dame Cheyne, with those of her daughter and the attendant maidens of the household, were busied with beef, mutton, venison, and fish, boiled, roast, and stewed—with “messes” of meat, dishes of viands “*endore*,” and potage of rabbit and hare—with mawmené, tarts, and jellies—with spices and sweets innumerable.

Gytha went through the whole mechanically, and so absently that she was very nearly making some grievous mistakes, which would quite have ruined the “crustade” mess of chickens and pigeons stewed in rich broth. Happily, she recollect ed in time, and thus escaped the chiding which would inevitably have broken down her fence of self-command. But the grief, to which she could not and would not yield, worked all the more

bitterly within. Gytha grew very weary as the day went on. It was a relief when Lady Cheyne bade her leave all that remained to be done in the hands of Anne Tufton, and retire with herself to the inner chamber.

Nobody was there. Lady Cheyne sat down in the chair, and motioned Gytha to the coffer in front of her.

"I would fain have a few quiet words with thee, child," she said in her calm way, yet her eyes were glistening with suppressed tenderness. "There be many things I would say to thee this last day, but I fear me I will scarce remember all."

"I shall hear from thee, madame, from time to time," said Gytha wistfully.

"Thou mayst be assured I will let slip no opportunity. Gytha, this is thy father's parting gift and mine to thee. Thou wouldst rather have this, I ween, than more costly attire."

"O madame! O my mother!"

Gytha's hands were clasped in ecstasy at sight of the heavy manuscript volume, written on vellum and bound in skin, which her mother lifted from behind the bed-curtain and placed in her arms.

"Thou wilt love it, Gytha—the four Gospels of our dear Lord's blessed life. I would it were the whole of Master Wickliffe's Bible, which he did do into our tongue, but thou wilt find all thy need within here."

Gytha went straight down on one knee, kissing her mother's hand. Then rising, she pressed her lips reverently to the cover of the book itself.

"Madame, thou little deemest the joy thou hast given me," she murmured.

"Nay, child, methinks I deem it well," the lady answered. "Hast thought thy mother never felt the like?"

“ Nay ; but it seemed unto me verily that all I loved was to be gone, and now thou hast given me this for mine own—no man ever to take it from me. O madame, I know not how to thank thee.”

“ Thou wilt sit thee down and read to me, Gytha, that I may have the chime of thy voice in my ears when thou art away. Choose where thou wilt.”

Gytha sat down as directed, holding the heavy volume on her knee, and trembling with mingled joy and sorrow. She turned over the leaves slowly, uncertain what to select ; and then, fearing her mother would be tired of waiting, began in low tremulous tones upon the next passage which caught her eyes—

“ Forsooth it was don, while thei wenten, and he entride in to sum castel ; and sum womman, Martha bi name, receyuede him in to hir hous. And to this Martha was a sister, Marie bi name, which also sittinge by sydis the feet of the Lord, herde the word of him. Forsothe Martha bisyede aboute moche seruyce. Which stood and seide, Lord, is it not of charge to thee that my sister lefte me aloone, for to mynystre ? therefore seye to hir, that she helpe me. And the Lord, answeringe, seide to hir, Martha, Martha, thou ert bysi and art troublid anentis ful manye thingis ; forsooth o thing is necessarie. Marie hath chose the beste part, which schal not—be—take—a wey—fro—hir.’ ”

Gytha’s voice faltered suddenly towards the close, and she burst into tears.

“ The Gospel speaketh sooth, Gytha,” said Lady Cheyne slowly. “ If thou hast chosen that best part, which Mary did choose, it shall never and in no wise be taken from thee. For surely and indeed the Lord Himself is stronger than Satan, how much so ever he hath desired for to lead thee astray.”

And as Gytha sobbed too much for speech, Lady Cheyne took the volume from her, and turning to the Gospel of St. John, herself read two or three verses aloud in her sweet composed voice.

“‘My sheepe heeren my vois, and I knowe hem, and thei suen me. And I ghyue to hem euerelasting lyf, and thei schulen not perische in to withouten ende, and ony man schal not rauysche hem of myn hond. That thing that my fadir ghaf to me, is more than alle; therfore no man may rauysche fro my fadris hond. I and the fadir ben o thing.’

“See, Gytha, how safe thou art, if in His hand,” said Lady Cheyne. “Thou wilt find comfort in His love for any grief on earth. Only be thou ware to cling close unto Him, and forget not the sound of His voice in the new life to the which thou art going.”

And then, shutting the volume and closing the silver clasps, Dame Cheyne laid it aside on the bench.

“It shall be placed in thy coffer ere to-night. Thou hast wept enough, Gytha. I would have thee list now unto me.”

Gytha dried her eyes, and sat up obediently, though still with heaving sobs.

“Thou hast been a good daughter unto me, Gytha. I have nought in thee to complain of, save that thy clerkly inclinations do whiles withdraw thee overmuch from thy womanly duties. I do sometimes fear me I have had thee taught to read and write over early, since thou hast learned to feel such fervent love for aught of book-lore, and mislikest thy daily duties. It doth greatly rest upon thee, Gytha, whether or no the Lady Cobham love thee.”

“I will strive to do my duty, madame,” said Gytha.

“And wherein I have failed—O mother, wilt thou forgive me?”

“Nay, I have no complaints for to make, save that I would I could change thy tastes in measure,” said the lady. And then she launched out into various practical directions on the subject of Gytha’s future life, to all of which Gytha listened earnestly, storing them up in her mind for future reference.

The interview over, Gytha made her reverence; and after receiving her mother’s kiss, took the Gospels, and went out through the courtyard up the stairs into the chamber where she slept. There she stowed away her treasure in the strong coffer, which contained her money, and her few simple ornaments, and her best winter furred robe and mantle, and her best summer gown of rich silk. She had no great varieties of costume, as the Lollard party habitually set its face against the extravagant fashions of the period, but Lady Cheyne took care that she should be sufficiently well supplied.

Gytha shut and locked the coffer, and made some slight alterations in her own dress. Ladies usually then put on in the morning the costume which was to serve for the whole day, but this was a special occasion. She could hear the busy stir of preparation going on in the hall below, but she did not want to find herself in the midst of it sooner than was necessary. So she only sat down on one of the beds, and gave herself up to sad thoughts, from which a great clatter and clangling and stamping of horses’ feet in the yard was the first thing to arouse her.

Then the travellers had come. Gytha’s heart beat fast, and a flush rose in her cheek. She thought her mother would wish her to go downstairs, but a shy fit seized upon her, and she sat on and on where she was, interlacing

her fingers nervously, and wishing some one would tell her what to do.

And presently, before any long time had passed, the door opened, and Mistress Tufton exclaimed—

“Why, Gytha, what art after here, sitting up in the soler* like to a hen in its roost? Know’st not that the company be come, and the Lord John Cobham himself, and thine own brother, and the Damoiselle Margaret Cobham, and as goodly a company of horsemen as ever I beheld? Thou wilt travel safely under such an escort, I ween. Prythee make haste and lay aside yon doleful visage, and do thy mother honour among her guests.”

“Nay, verily, methinks I do her honour in my sorrow at quitting of her,” Gytha answered, as she rose. “But I will come, Mistress Tufton, without delay.”

And laying aside her “doleful visage,” as required, Gytha entered the hall with a very composed face, though undoubtedly not a bright one. She found the company about to take their places at the board—a literal and not a fanciful term in those days. The tables, which were simply made of boards laid upon trestles, had been placed “banquet-wise”—that is, with the principal table crosswise at the upper end of the hall, and the other tables lengthwise down the body of the building.

In the prevailing confusion Gytha’s entrance was at the first moment unobserved. She had time to stand still and scan the scene. Her large grey eyes travelled thoughtfully upwards from the busy throng at the lower tables, till they fastened on the Lady Cheyne, just in the act of gracefully handing a knight to the seat of honour by her side. Gytha noted with a passing glance that his helmet and part of his armour had been removed, and that his

* Upstairs storey.

doublet and close-fitting surcoat were plain and travel-stained, though a mantle of richer material hung from his shoulders. But before she could observe more, a voice said at her side—

“Dost ken me, Gytha?”

“Alfgar!”

She stepped forward, and then stepped back, almost afraid she had made a mistake. Was it possible that the wild-spirited little page, of five years back, could have become transformed into this tall slender thoughtful youth, whose warlike coat-of-mail seemed rather in contrast than in unison with his peculiarly fair broad brow and serious grey eyes?

“Alfgar!” she repeated doubtfully; but he said, “Ay,” and took her hand and kissed her.

“Thou didst not know me, little sister? Nay, but I would have kenned thee the world over, for all thou hast grown so tall and comely.”

“Tis five years gone,” she said apologetically. “And thou wert over two years mine elder—think!—thou hast passed thine eighteenth birthday. And thou wert but an ill-mannered page then, Alfgar—pardon me—and now thou art his lordship’s most trusty esquire.”

“*Most!* I would I could deem myself so in sober truth. Think’st thou there be one among us who would not die for him? But am I thus changed, my sister?”

“Truly the change is for the better,” said Gytha, with a soft flash of her eyes. “Thou wilt not now threaten thy coward sister with lance in rest.”

“And perchance my sweet sister is of braver metal than of old, and less easily frightened,” said Alfgar, looking at her with half-earnest, half-smiling admiration. “But thy mother beckons thee, Gytha, and I must away to serve my lord.”

Gytha timidly responded to Lady Cheyne's signal, and stood meekly with downcast eyes beside the massive chair, on which Lady Cheyne and Sir John Oldcastle sat enthroned.

"My lord, this be the little *chambrière* whom ye have graciously undertaken to carry home to your dame," said Gytha's mother, using the more respectful form of speech in the plural person.

Lord Cobham arose instantly from his seat, and with knightly courtesy bestowed upon Gytha the stately ceremonious kiss which was the usual form of public greeting. Then again taking her hand, he placed her in the vacant corner of the bench by his side.

"Fair maiden, wilt thou be content to come with me unto my far distant home?"

Gytha lifted her eyes slowly to his before answering, as if to see whether her childish recollections had served her faithfully. He was a man in the very prime of life, of noble presence, and chivalrous bearing. No common order of mind and power lay beneath that full wide forehead, while pride and wit and sweetness met all together in the lines of the resolute mouth; and the grave kindly eyes, bent upon her with such fatherly gentleness, might well inspire Gytha with confidence.

"Thou hast not answered, child," said her mother.

"I will be well content," said Gytha simply.

"Thou art marvellously like unto thy brother," said Lord Cobham, his face breaking into a pleasant smile. "Wilt thou be my child, even as is he?"

Gytha glanced at her mother, and tears filled her eyes.

"I will even strive to do my duty, my lord," she said, in a choked voice.

"Hast spoken to thy brother, Gytha?" asked Sir William Cheyne. "What think'st thou of him?"

"He hath grown and changed wondrously, sir," said Gytha.

"If he be changed, he hath verily grown like unto thee, or thou unto him," said Sir John. "The one fair face reflects the other."

"Soothly, the Damoiselle de Cheyne will be fair queen of a tournament one day," said a merry girlish voice; and Gytha lifted her eyes, with a little start, to meet those of a slim dark-complexioned maiden, somewhat older than herself, whose irregular features were only redeemed from absolute plainness by the vivacious sparkle of her expression, and the courtly grace of her bearing. She wore a gown of blue cloth, lined and heavily bordered with squirrel's fur, the sleeves being so long and large that they literally lay upon the ground, whether she sat or stood. Over this was a sleeveless super-tunic of blue silk, likewise lined with fur, and richly embroidered with silver, open in front, but trailing far upon the ground behind. Her black hair was confined in a gold net, with a velvet hood surmounting. Glass panes had not yet found their way to the hall of this old country manor, though the chamber windows were glazed; so warm clothing, even at a crowded banquet, was not unnecessary in the month of February.

"My name is cleped* Margaret of Cobham," said the young lady, answering Gytha's doubtful look. Truth to tell, she had forgotten all about the Cobhams of Sterborough and their expected representative this evening. "I too am *chambrière* unto the most noble Dame Joan of Cobham. We shall be friends, fair maiden, thou and I."

Poor Gytha, in her mingled bewilderment at the present stir, and grief at the coming morrow, nearly let the remark pass unacknowledged; but a glance from her

* Called.

mother recalled her. She bent her head and murmured,—

“I thank you for your courtesy, madame.”

For a while after that, she was left to herself,—partly, perhaps, through kindness, partly because it was not so much the custom to talk during the heavier portion of the meal as when it neared its close. By this time, the squires at the upper table and the serving men at the lower had spread white cloths over the boards, and placed thereupon, first, that most important article, the massive silver salt-cellar, and then such pieces of plate as the house could produce. To each guest a cup and a trencher of bread was supplied, and knives to those among them who did not already possess one stuck in the girdle, at hand for all emergencies.

A basin, jug, and towel were then carried round the hall, beginning with the occupants of the higher table, that all might wash their hands—no unimportant matter, since the said hands in those days took the place of forks in these. A dainty business, too, was this use of the fingers; and not a little particular were our forefathers as to whether it was accomplished in gentlemanly or ungentlemanly style. And then, preparations being completed, dinner was served,—chicken and roast meat upon spits, and messes of more elaborate description in dishes, and delicacies of a lighter kind, following each in turn, varied by the ceremonious serving of the wine-cup. In the latter critical operation, Gytha noted proudly, from beneath her drooping lashes, that Alfgar specially and gracefully excelled.

Had the banquet been in any but a Lollard household, it would doubtless have been followed up by prolonged drinking, mummeries in the hall, and possibly dancing in conclusion. As it was, no excesses were permitted,

and perfect decorum reigned, though conversation flowed fast and freely towards the close, and many a witty word was uttered.

When no gaieties were expected, it was a pretty well understood thing that supper should be followed by bed. Five o'clock supper!—but the meal lasted long; and in those primitive days, people really did habitually rise with the dawn, and go to sleep with the sun.

Sir William Cheyne had not, however, neglected to provide a little previous pleasure for his guests. An old blind harper was ushered into the hall, and discoursed various sweet melodies with touching power, to his delighted hearers. And then at last came the summons, which a poor little beating heart had dreadfully foretold—

“Gytha, it pleaseth Lord Cobham to hear thee sing.”

Gytha's lips formed an entreating,—“Mother!—madame!—I pray thee!”—but no sound came forth. She dared not protest. And it was Alfgar himself who brought forward the harp, and led her to it from the table, saying softly—

“Cheer, up, fair sister; thou art braver than of old, I ween. What wilt sing to us, Gytha?”

Gytha sat down without speaking, her head bent down and her lips trembling, as she swept her fingers softly across the strings, bringing out a sound like the moan of a wounded animal. But at the first note of that low weird wail, her head was lifted in forgetfulness of all else; while the very dogs pricked up their ears, and the old blind harper bent forward to listen, and Sir John murmured to Lady Cheyne, “She hath verily the soul of music in her—fair child!”

Another softer slower wail, and a few low chords, and then came a rush of passionate pleading melody; while

the girl's wonderful grey eyes, usually so soft and calm, glowed and sparkled like burning coals, repeatedly filling with tears. She broke off suddenly in the midst of her playing, with another low subdued wail, and then burst, as if involuntarily, into the song they wanted. There was nothing of acting in it all, but genuine feeling and enthusiasm. The very pose of her slender figure, and the careless grace of every motion, showed utter self-forgetfulness.

And the song that followed entranced every one present. The words were only the simple rugged utterances of some old Lollard hymn ; but the girl's rich flexible voice filled the building with its marvellous power, rising and falling in wild cadence, and thrilling the hearts of those who heard her.

Silence, and then a subdued murmur of admiration, followed the conclusion. Margaret Cobham spoke in eager praise ; but it was not until Sir John Oldcastle addressed her, that Gytha lifted her bent head.

"Wilt sing us another, gentle maiden ? Thy voice is passing sweet to hear."

"An ye will ask but this one, my lord," said Gytha.

"Thou art weary. Nay, then, the next shall be the last."

Again the sweet notes of the harp swelled softly, vibrating through the hall,—less passionately but more mournfully than the time before. And then, in clear and beautiful but almost dirge-like tones, came an impromptu farewell to her home. Every word was distinct ; and the low tender voice neither faltered nor trembled through verse after verse, which seemed to spring up spontaneously from the depths of her heart. Critically examined, there might have been small poetic merit in the effusion ; but the intense feeling and exquisite pathos were such that none could listen with dry eyes.

The last sweet prolonged note of the last line—"Farewell to thee ! farewell, my mother!"—died slowly, slowly away, till it sank to a mere faint tremor of the air, and ceased. Gytha rose calmly, motioned to Alfgar to remove her harp, walked forward a few steps, knelt, and kissed her mother's hand ; then silently left the hall, and was seen no more.

It was an irregular proceeding, but not even Lady Cheyne's strict notions of maternal duty could work her up to the point of administering a chiding that evening. The party speedily broke up and retired to rest—Margaret Cobham and her women to the upstairs chamber with Gytha and the housemaids ; Sir John Oldcastle and his squires to the ground-floor chamber ; servants and men-at-arms being left to find such quarters as best they might around the hall-fire.

And then the morning came. But the true leave-taking was past. In the bustle and commotion of that early start there was little room for display of feeling. Gytha was very pale and composed ; and Margaret Cobham cast many a glance at her fair childlike face and sober eyes, marvelling whether she could in truth be identical with the young minstrel of the preceding evening.

CHAPTER III.

OLD LONDON.

ON Tuesday afternoon, the 4th of March, that same spring, a considerable body of travellers might have been seen wending their way through the streets of London, bearing very evident marks of being near the close of a long and toilsome journey.

At their head rode a mail-clad knight, of stately height and courtly bearing, whose sober attire and plain though costly mantle marked him out as something different from the richly-dressed gentlemen of the day. On either side of him was a noble damsel upon her palfrey—the handsome clothes of the one and the quiet garb of the other being alike much bespattered with mud. Following after, there came three or four squires, one of whom seemed to vie with the knight in soberness of costume, while the others made display of startlingly brilliant sur-coats over their armour. The squires were in attendance upon two or three serving women, of a lower grade than the maidens in front, yet apparently on something of a level with the rank of ladies. Next came the body of well-trained horsemen, Lord Cobham's own retainers—and lastly a motley assortment of travellers, picked up by the way, between Herefordshire and London. In those days of dangerous travelling, a safe escort was

never to be despised, and was rarely if ever refused. People often waited long for such an opportunity ere they dared set out upon their way.

"And this is London!" said Gytha wonderingly, after riding some way in silence. "This!"—and she looked round her, with something of disgust, at the close street and the rugged road under feet, amongst the miry ruts and hollows of which the horses needed carefully to pick their way. "It meseemeth that London folk care little for the light of day. One soler upward more, and the houses would meet o'erhead, and leave us altogether in the darkness."

"Nay, folks do take heed that they stop short of that," said Sir John, smiling. "Thou hast not learned to love London yet, as a citizen of its own. But wait a while, fair Gytha, till thou hast beheld the beauties of this London."

"The beauties!"—repeated Gytha. "I looked not to find aught of beauty in the great city."

"Oh! thou deemest not—thou wittest not, Gytha," cried Margaret impetuously. "Wait till thou hast been up our noble cathedral of St. Paul, and hast seen the fair view which lies outspread, of housetops and streets; and of the knights and the squires and the ladies and the citizens promenading below in bravest attire; and of the orchards of Paternoster Row and Ivy Lane and others near at hand, nestling among the houses, and far away the fields and country surrounding. Oh, and the river, Gytha—our beauteous river Thames, with its clear, clear waters, and its boats and gallants, and its thousand snowy stately swans. O Gytha, thou know'st not London yet."

"Thou pleadest well the city's cause, Margaret," said Lord Cobham. "But here we halt; for, see, we have reached my London home. 'Tis late to-night, and ye

are full weary ; but on the morrow thou mayst try more persuasive arguments than words, for we will not depart to the Castle, till the day following."

"Lieth Rochester far distant from London, Margaret?" Gytha asked, as they rode into the large court-yard of a somewhat deserted-looking mansion, while Sir John reined back to give directions to his followers.

"A full day's journey," Margaret answered, stroking her palfrey's neck ; "and Canterbury lieth a day farther still ahead. It was indeed reported, my mother hath told me, that the Princess Joan of Wales, in fleeing from Wat Tyler, did actually reach Canterbury from London in one day, but little short of a miracle could have enabled her to accomplish the same."

And now Sir John came back, and with due courtesy, himself assisted the two young ladies to dismount, and ushered them into the hall. The interior of the mansion was alike gloomy and stately, but Gytha was so weary that she was in no state for weighing either defects or advantages ; and Margaret, compassionating her, made request for a private supper in their chamber. Thither she conducted Gytha, and there after some refreshment, Gytha speedily forgot her fatigue, her excitement, and her partings, in sleep.

The early morning waking had hitherto been the saddest portion of the day to her since leaving home ; for she had been ever given to rise with the sun, and go to her mother's chamber, first for a sweet reading of the Bible, followed by a slight breakfast, and then by hours of work or spinning, close to that same mother's side. She had been wont to murmur in her heart at the latter occupation, and this very fact now made her grieve the more to know that—so far as her own home, and the companionship of Lady Cheyne were concerned—it was

utterly at an end. Poor Gytha's pillow had grown wet with many tears each morning at the thought of the change in her life—notwithstanding that she loved her brother, and liked Margaret, and viewed Sir John Oldcastle with a girl's deep enthusiastic admiration.

This morning, however, she slept so late, and when she awoke, Margaret was in so chatty a mood, that she really had no leisure for sad musings. Usually she had taken out her Gospels and read them before any one else in the room was awake—not from cowardice, but for quiet. To-day, however, she was the last to rise, so she quietly finished her dressing, and then as usual drew her treasure from the chest which contained it.

Margaret noted the motion curiously, and stood with her raven locks falling about her shoulders, to watch the grave fair young face opposite, bending over the heavy volume with its silver clasps.

"Forsooth, Gytha—" she said at length, and Gytha lifted her eyes seriously from the book.

"Gytha, forsooth—art thou a clerk?"

"Women can never be clerks," said Gytha soberly, checking a feeling of impatience at the interruption. "I do love reading, Margaret."

"Reading! But reading what? *That* book with its weighty clasps containeth surely no *fabliaux*."

"My mother loveth not that I should read *fabliaux*," said Gytha calmly. "Thou knowest surely I am a Gospeller, Margaret."

"Thou! A Lollard!"

"Soothly, Margaret,—why, Lord Cobham himself is even the same."

"Lord Cobham,—oh, ay," said Margaret, with a touch of disdain in her tone. "Lord Cobham hath Prince Harry for his friend and protector, and may say and think

what it pleaseth him,—though even he had best beware not go too far. But thou—a child like thee—what hast thou to do with the matter?"

"Art thou a Catholic, Margaret?" asked Gytha, simply in return.

Margaret shrugged her shoulders slightly. "Nay, my faith is one that fits me full light and easily. In the household of Lord Cobham I can right well abuse the clergy for their greed of wealth and costly fare: and in a Catholic household I can go unto confession, and run off my misdemeanours past from the tip of my tongue, as glibly as any member of the Romish Church."

"Thy faith may fit thee lightly now! How will it fit thee in another world?"

"Gytha! Now, were I apt to take offence—" Margaret paused, and then smiled. "'Twas said with as solemn emphasis as Sir John Beverley himself could assume. I will verily recommend my cousin, Lord Cobham, to turn thee into a preaching priest, and send thee about his domains. Nay, nay, Gytha, thou hadst best keep thee to thy singing, which is marvellous. Thou hast the fairest face I ever yet beheld, with those deep eyes of thine, with which thou mayest win and break many a heart. Leave thy Gospel-reading, Gytha, and put aside thy gloom."

"Nay, I am not gloomy. I am happier than thou," said Gytha. "For my faith is as a strong staff which bears me up whithersoever I may turn; while thine is but a flimsy garment which thou needs must carry, but which giveth thee neither support nor warmth."

"Certes, Gytha, thou art a born preacher," said Margaret, a little impatiently. "But I did invite the same. Get thee to thy reading, or thou wilt never be done. Only I warn thee, whatsoever thou thinkest, to guard thy tongue against overmuch talk on these subjects."

Gytha was by no means given to "overmuch talk," and read her portion quietly without another word. And so late had they risen that morning, that no great length of leisure remained, before they were summoned by a blast of trumpets to the nine o'clock dinner in the hall.

"Gytha, wilt thou come and walk with me to-day, and see the city?" asked Alfgar, when the meal was over.

"But his lordship, Alfgar; will he not require thy presence?"

"Nay, he gave me leave, or I would not ask thee. Wilt come, Gytha? His lordship hath many things to do in the city, and we shall scarce see him again till supper."

Gytha was by no means unwilling for a confidential walk and talk with Alfgar, whom she had as yet scarcely once seen alone. But this time she was to be disappointed of her wish. As she came into the hall, equipped for her stroll, Margaret Cobham entered at the other end, likewise apparelled.

"What! Gytha, and thy brother likewise,—the thing I most desired. Arnold Savage and I will even accompany ye both with your permission."

Gytha gave one despairing glance at her brother, as she stood by his side in one of the deep embrasured windows. "O Margaret,—if thou didst but ken how I do mislike Master Savage," she said involuntarily.

"'Tis a misliking all of one side. 'Twas but five minutes since he was waxing eloquent over thy charms."

"I would fain he kept his eloquence unto himself," said Gytha, reining up her head, with an unconscious air of childlike dignity which exceedingly amused Margaret.

"Thou hadst best tell him so. We will give thee the opportunity." And before Gytha had well taken in the sense of the words, she found herself walking out of the hall by the side of Arnold Savage, while Margaret and

her brother went in front. Alfgar, whatever he wished, was powerless in the matter. His courtly training necessitated absolute obedience to the commands which any "fair ladye" might lay upon him. Gytha's companion was the only son and heir to a certain Sir Arnold Savage, of Bobbing, lord of the manor of Shorne, in Kent. Like other youths of the day, he had been sent to Castle Coulyng for knightly training, and was one of Lord Cobham's own esquires. He was of middle height, and strongly built, with a handsome face in the main, though its good looks were somewhat impaired by a certain indecision of the lower jaw and narrowness of brow. Possibly there might have been greater manliness in his appearance, but for his attire. Alfgar retained his doublet and short mantle, but Arnold Savage, not only laying aside his armour, had donned a gown of blue satin, lined with fur, the sleeves of which mingled with the train of his parti-coloured mantle, and swept the muddy roads.

Two-and-two, hand-in-hand, they walked,—but so did the good citizens of London, whom they met, pacing the streets in gowns and mantles and hoods, with vast sleeves and bedraggled fur-trimmed trains. It was esteemed the very height of good breeding that a gentleman should daintily hold one finger of his companion-lady's hand, and Gytha took care that Arnold should have little chance of exceeding this rule.

"What think'st thou of London, Madame Gytha, in comparison of the country?" asked Arnold, as they walked along, with a vague idea of seeing the city generally for Gytha's benefit, and concluding with a row on the river.

"'Tis marvellous dark and dirty for my taste," said Gytha, in the dryest tone of which her particularly sweet voice was capable.

"Call'st thou this dirty? Why, 'tis but twenty years,

as they say, since the streets were scarce passable, and an order was issued by Parliament that, under penalty of twenty pounds, no garbage nor refuse should be cast into the roads. Likewise our good scavengers the ravens be ever at work—seest thou?"

"Truly, I do see," responded Gytha indifferently. "London meseemeth to abound in ravens and kites. For my part, I do love greatly more the sweet songsters of the country."

"See there a little child feeding of a kite with the bread and the butter in its hand. Your country songsters be scarce so tame."

Gytha did not take the trouble to refute the accusation, if indeed it had been possible. He tried another tack.

"Hast ever seen a tournament, Madame Gytha? I would King Harry or the Prince would e'en set one agoing. 'Tis many years since Smithfield saw its last."

"I think I would not greatly love to see a joust," said Gytha soberly.

"Thou wouldest not? I would beg thee on bended knee for scarf or kerchief, and thy colours should win the day, let challenge who would. Thine eyes should nerve mine arm to smite every foe to the ground."

"Thou art surely gabbing," said Gytha innocently, without lifting her downcast eyes, and speaking in allusion to a popular game or habit of boastful joking at dinner or banquet. "*Thine* arm oppose all comers!"

"And why not, Madame Gytha,—if I had thy colours, and the approval of thy fair face?"

She laughed quietly. "Neither my colours nor mine approval be so lightly bestowed, Master Savage, for deeds that may one day be done but are not yet accomplished. Madame Margaret knoweth more of these things than I. Thou hast best go to her."

But he showed no signs of taking the hint, and launched out in another direction. "The city seemeth right gay this day. I would thou hadst seen it three years agone, couldst thou have so done without aught of danger to thyself."

"Was it even gayer then?"

"Nay, 'twas the last coming of the pest—when over thirty thousand in number were swept away, and the city was one vast desert of desolation and death."

Gytha's cheek whitened, and then glowed. "I thank thee, Master Savage. 'Twas truly a gallant wish on thy part that I should enjoy so fair a sight."

"Nay, I meant not that," said Arnold, confused; "save only for its marvellous contrast with to-day—as a matter of interest. But truly I would not wish thou hadst been here."

"I could wish it myself, for the helping of the poor sufferers, but soothly not for the viewing of a spectacle so awful and so sad," Gytha answered, half under her breath.

"Ha! there goeth a litter past; I marvel who may be within," said Arnold, glad to turn to something else. "It seemeth to me a strange concourse of people, this day, all wending their way in the selfsame direction. What think'st thou be the cause?"

"Alfgar deemeth it likely there is some rare spectacle ahead," said Margaret, looking back. "Oh, I do love a crowd and a spectacle. Nay, I will not have thee make aught of inquiry, Alfgar. We will e'en follow with the folk, and learn for ourselves."

Alfgar made no protest, and in a few minutes they became so involved in the gathering throng, that to turn back would have been almost an impossibility. "We shall be speedily in Smithfield," Arnold remarked. "Would it were a tournament which awaited us there, Dame Gytha. Thou would'st then know what chivalry is."

"Nay, I am not ignorant so far. Who could be thrown with our noble lord, Sir John, and know not the truest meaning of chivalry?" responded Gytha. "He *liveth* it, while others do but talk it."

The open square of Smithfield lay before them, but a dense mass of heads prevented any clear vision of what occupied the centre. Margaret suddenly changed her mind about proceeding, and declared her determination to go no farther, while Alfgar's will seemed to have taken the place of hers. "Then Arnold will remain for to protect thee, Margaret, and Gytha and I will proceed onwards through the throng. I know not what may be yonder, but methinks I would not turn away, having advanced thus far."

Margaret might have rebelled, but Gytha had drawn her hand from that of Arnold and sprung to her brother's side, with such eager satisfaction, that she could hardly refuse assent. And in another minute Alfgar was steadily pressing onwards, guarding his sister from the crush with his muscular though slight-looking arms, and momentarily nearing the centre.

They reached at length to within a few yards of the inner verge of the crowd, where lay a comparatively empty space. There they paused, farther advance or retreat being alike impossible.

What was this sight, upon which they had thus unwittingly stumbled?

In the centre was fixed a tall wooden stake, with some fagots laid neatly round it, and others flung carelessly on the ground near at hand. Beside the latter pile was also a large cask or barrel, with the bottom removed. A guard of soldiers stood round about, and in their midst was a rough cart, from which had just descended a worn pale man of middle age, bearing about him no marks of gentle-

blood, but with the higher nobility of suffering and victory stamped in clear lines upon his calm and furrowed brow.

A little to the right was to be seen a small group of horsemen, most of them young, and all of them apparelléd in the very extreme of the extravagantly gay fashions of the day. The splendid surcoats and gorgeous mantles, the gem-bespangled hoods and jewelled sword-hilts, made a perfect blaze of radiant colouring, rainbow-like in brilliancy, but somewhat barbaric as to taste.

At their head rode a peculiarly noble-looking young man of about twenty-one, whose magnificent mantle of crimson velvet, lined with costly ermine, and yet more, whose princely bearing, seemed to mark him as superior in rank to all present. He was tall, and slenderly though powerfully made. An expression of concern and of perhaps unwonted gravity rested upon his fair and handsome features, meeting however with no reflection in the gay faces of his thoughtless followers. The whole affair was one of no small entertainment to them.

There was silence in the great crowd, for a priest in full canonicals was preaching in loud and vehement tones to the pale prisoner before him. And a little way off, advancing through the throng to the left, which parted to make way for them, and knelt in the mud or made lowly reverence as they passed, came a procession of priests, bearing twelve flaming torches, and a little box beneath a velvet canopy.

"Gytha, I would I had not brought thee hither," said Alfgar, in a troubled voice, as he felt how powerless they were to escape.

"Alfgar, what meaneth it all?—what meaneth it?" demanded Gytha fearfully, with panting breath.

CHAPTER IV.

JOHN BADBY.

“WHAT meaneth it?” echoed a voice at her side. “Forsooth, and it meaneth that yonder pestilent pestiferous heretic is speedily about to expiate his sins in the flames, unless he do forthwith recant from his errors.”

Gytha turned a blanched face towards the speaker, but a sudden pressure of her brother’s hand upon hers checked the exclamation which had almost escaped her. Alfgar spoke in her stead—

“By what name is yonder man cleped,* good sir?”

“John Badby—naught but a tailor, John Badby, a poor and ignorant layman, setting up of his erroneous opinions in the face of priest and monk. Methinks ‘tis time the matter be taken up; yet it seemeth hard for the poor wretch that no space for repentance and amendment be granted to him.”

“Mayhap he needeth it not,” murmured Alfgar involuntarily, forgetting the prudence he had just been anxious to impress upon Gytha.

“Needeth it not! Nay; an he recant not, what priest may confess and assoille him? And if he die unassooiled—” The comfortable rosy face of the old citizen grew almost

* Called.

pale, and he drew up the skirt of his long Flemish-cloth gown, with a sort of horrified involuntary gesture. "Soothly 'tis a hard matter that he be thus cut off from all hope of repentance; albeit, his reverence the archbishop doubtless knoweth best."

"Master Arundel, although archbishop, is likewise but a man, and may e'en fail in wisdom, as other men," said Alfgar.

A keen glance responded to the remark. "Thy tongue smacketh of Lollardism, young sir! Nay, an *thou* art one of them—"

"I said not I was aught, the one way or the other," interposed Alfgar hastily.

"Canst say thou art a Catholic? Canst say yonder pile will do a holy work? Nay, nay, thy feelings be somewhat too plainly written on thy face, young master, as on the fair brow of the damoiselle by thy side. Ye need not fear. Think ye *I* would wish to see your two comely forms shrivelling in the flames?"

Gytha shuddered deeply, and her brother bent over her.

"Canst thou bear it?" he asked, speaking low. "'Tis no sight for thee, gentle one, yet I wis not how to escape. Look away, Gytha, look away."

But a horrid fascination seemed to chain her eyes to the prisoner, and her parched lips refused to answer. Alfgar put his arm round her to render support, in dread of a swoon, which might draw general attention. She had more, however, of nervous strength and self-command than he was aware. Her horror was simply intense sympathy with the sufferer—no mere selfish sentimental dread of looking upon pain and death.

"Nay, nay," the old citizen was going on,—"Sith such doings be necessary, then let them be; but 'tis for the

clergy, and not for such as I to have a hand in them. "Twas said, not so many years agone, that an ye met two men in the road, ye might of a surety count the one for a Catholic, and the other for a follower of Master Wickliffe. I know not if the numbers be now lessened, but methinks an this be the only mode of treating the disease, a mighty bonfire will ere long be needed."

"The prince loveth not such mode of treatment," said Alfgar.

"Nay; there ye speak truly. I marvel much to see him here this day."

"The prince!" said Gytha, starting.

"Ay, Prince Hal himself," answered the old man. "Know'st not the look of him, fair maiden? Yonder he rides,—he of the princely carriage, and the crimson mantle, and the somewhat troubled face. Prince Harry is not wont to look thus grave. But see, the chancellor hath ended his discourse,—methinks with small effect upon the heretic,—and the prince steppeth forward to address him."

"The prince! O Alfgar, will the prince indeed see him die thus?" asked Gytha, low and passionately.

"The prince loveth not such deeds, Gytha, but he hath small power here, where the king's command¹ hath passed," said Alfgar sorrowfully. "I doubt me little he will do what he may,—but hearken, he speaketh now."

Every murmur of the crowd sank into silence, as the prince rode up to the prisoner, and in clear tones, which could be distinctly heard where the brother and sister stood, earnestly endeavoured to shake his resolution. John Badby listened calmly and humbly, but no sign of faltering showed in his worn face.

"Think of thyself; have pity on thine own grievous condition," urged the prince, bringing forward the argu-

ments which moved his own heart. "Hast thou no wife and children to mourn for thee when thou art gone? Wilt thou be able to stand the grievous pain of the fire? And for what? Nought, but that thou must needs meddle in matters which the Church in her wisdom forbiddeth thee, and work thyself into a dark labyrinth from which thou findest no outlet. There is yet time for thee to repent. I beseech thee, in pity, good man,—I beseech thee, bethink thee ere it be too late; bethink thee, and turn thee unto the bosom of Holy Church, and shrieve thee of thy sins. I will insure thee thy pardon from the king, an thou wilt recant. Say but the word—one word."

But the word did not come.

"I do thank ye full heartily, noble prince, for your compassion; but my care for my soul is greater than my care for my body," the prisoner answered. "And for my sins, of which ye do speak truly—many and fearful have they been. But a mightier than priest or monk hath assoiled me ere to-day—even He who is Himself the Priest of priests, and who dwelleth in the heavens."

"Ye see, noble prince, ye see," eagerly interposed the chancellor of Oxford, whose eloquence in preaching had so signally failed, "words be but lost breath against the contumacy of these erroneous dogs—these heretics against Holy Church. The law must e'en take its course. Sir, I pray you, hinder not the carrying out the king's command."

"Nay, nay; bide yet awhile," said the prince half-impatiently. "I love not to see a fellow-creature thus toss aside the life which God hath given him." And again turning to John Badby, the prince bent lower in his saddle, with renewed arguments and earnest entreaties, delivered with the winning fascination of manner for which he was so remarkable.

"Alfgar, thinkest thou he will not fail?" Gytha whispered to her brother, after listening awhile.

"Wouldst thou have him yield, Gytha?"

"I! Would I?" She lifted her deep eyes to his in almost speechless wonder. "Would I have mine own Lord again denied and forsaken by any one of His disciples? Alfgar, nay,—'tis a sore sight to see; but rather the servant's pain than the gentle Master's grief."

"And yet methinks the servant's pain is deeper suffering unto the Master," murmured Alfgar, "although—wherefore we know not—it needs must be. But soothly the reward to follow will come speedily. See, Gytha, see, he hath NOT failed. Our Lord hath surely strengthened him, and the prince hath yielded in despair."

It was even so. The prince reined back his horse, and sank into gloomy silence. Then the priests, with their flaming torches and their velvet canopy, came forward, and the prior of St. Bartholomew's, stepping up to John Badby, who was now bound to the stake, demanded,—

"How believest thou, John Badby, in this holy sacrament?"

Did they think that even at that last moment he might retract? Steadily he answered,—

"Soothly I do believe that it is hallowed bread, and not as ye would assert, the very body of our Lord."

The great barrel was let down over him, and as he stood upright inside it, wood was piled around him, within and beneath. There was a hush among the expectant throng. Then the wood was set alight, and it blazed and crackled cheerily. Gytha's fingers tightened into a convulsive grasp upon her brother's hand.

"Oh! can he—can he endure?" she half-unconsciously breathed.

" 'Twill be but a brief torture for him, my Gytha," Alfgar's white lips murmured.

But it was to be longer than they had thought. A cry broke from the sufferer's lips,—a cry of "Mercy! mercy!" which thrilled through many a heart. Whether in a moment of bodily weakness he sought to move the pity of those around him, or whether he were calling to his God for help, must ever remain a mystery. The sequel seems rather to point to the latter explanation. The general impression at the moment would probably have been rather in favour of the former.

Kind-hearted Prince Harry could not stand the sight, though monk and priest might look upon it unmoved. He spurred forward again.

"Have out the man—Have out the man!" he cried. "Give unto him yet a chance for his life. He repenteth. He crieth us mercy. Mercy he shall have,—an but he will recant."

"The king,—" objected the prior by no means pleased.

"Nay, but verily I *will*—I will have it so! I the prince will answer for mine own deeds unto the king. Thou need'st not fear. Will ye dare to gainsay your prince? Release the man."

Those ringing authoritative tones were not to be despised. The scorched half-stifled sufferer was dragged from the flames, which had already fearfully injured his lower limbs, and was placed before Prince Henry.

Another chance for life! Again the choice given him between life earthly and life heavenly! Had his cry been for mercy from priest or monk, he must surely have yielded now. The prince pleaded afresh with impassioned earnestness. If it were so hard for him to see this man die, what must it not be for the man himself? Why would not John Badby take pity on his poor body? He had

proved his constancy so far. Now let him turn and think of this world's happiness. The king would pardon him. Prince Harry would take care about that. He was lamed—it might be incurably; Prince Harry would provide for him. He should have three pence a day out of the royal treasury. Only just to give up one or two points in dispute—only to yield his judgment to the decisions of the Church—only to put aside Master Wickliffe's heretical views—only to,—ah! it came to that,—*only* to deny his Lord and Master.

He did not yield. Alfgar and Gytha, and doubtless many others present, stood praying for him, that he might have grace to endure. And the grace was given. In all his suffering and weakness—ay, though he had tasted of the anguish of the fiery chariot which was to bear him to glory—John Badby still held firm. He would not retract. He would not stain his lips by falsehood, professing to believe what he did not believe. He would not deny his Master.

Slowly and reluctantly the prince gave up hope of saving Badby. More than he had already done he could not do. The king's command had passed. Prince Harry had reached the uttermost extent of his tether. If Badby held firm, the prince must yield. If Badby would not recant, he had to die.

They put him back into the barrel. Again he was fastened to the stake. Again the flames sprang fiercely up around him, fanned by the soft spring breezes. The crowd looked on quietly—some weeping in pity or sympathy,—some marvelling if their turn too should ever come, and if they should find strength to endure as John Badby endured.

It was a fierce and fiery chariot,—but not for long. Those last few steps of the martyr's homeward journey

were very brief. A few minutes more of bitter pain and anguish—and then—what mattered earthly flames to John Badby any more? Even in their midst he had his Master by his side. The river was dark and deep that day, but it was quickly forded. Priest and prior, chancellor and monk, had wreaked their worst upon him—but that worst was only to hasten his entrance into rest. Their ire was powerless now. John Badby, beholding his Master's face in glory, had passed beyond their power. And for the poor body, still left in the curling flames,—men looked upon it pityingly. But Badby was not there!

"Gytha—the folks are moving, and I would fain have thee away."

She looked up, vacantly. "'Tis 'all over with *him*," Alfgar said softly. "Sorrow not for his joy, sweet one. Rather might we grieve that the Master hath not called us likewise."

Gytha's lips moved slightly, but she made no audible answer, and permitted herself to be led away as if in a dream. Margaret Cobham and her companion had disappeared; but if Gytha remembered their existence at all at that moment, it was not to regret their absence. She did not lean upon her brother, but walked steadily, needing no support; and only looking straight before her all the way, with a face white and fixed as marble, yet strangely sweet in its calmness.

"So thou didst linger for to witness the brave sight," were the words with which Margaret greeted her, on her entrance into the hall of Sir John's house. "Verily thou hast a stouter heart than I, for all thy tender beauty."

"Madame Margaret loveth not the smell of burnt flesh," said Arnold Savage.

He had not expected to see Gytha's downcast eyes

raised to his with such a flash of indignation. But they sank again instantly, and she was moving on without a word, when Margaret laid a detaining hand on her arm.

“Where art going, Gytha? Canst tell us nought of what thou hast seen?”

Boards upon trestles were being prepared at that moment for supper. Gytha laid one hand upon the table nearest, pressing the other over it.

“I have seen the worst and utmost which man hath power to work,” she said slowly, with low panting breath. “I have seen a martyr of God pass from earth to heaven. And it meseemeth that this utmost was verily but a pin-prick, as compared with that which cometh after.”

“Thou speaketh soothly, gentle Gytha!”

They had not heard the entrance of Sir John Oldcastle. Gytha looked at him with a sudden start, and he took her hand in his.

“‘Nyl ye dreede hem that sleen the body—’”

“I dread them not; ‘tis little they may do,” she said, with an expression which reminded Margaret of her face in singing, that last evening at her home. But then the confident look passed suddenly. Was it a vague foreshadowing of the future, which made her bend her head with a sudden burst of tears?

“‘Nyl ye dreede!’” repeated Lord Cobham slowly. “Hast forgotten, Gytha, the words of our dear Lord to us? ‘Blessid be thei that suffren persecucioun for right-wisnesse, for the kyngdam of heuenes is herun. Yee shulen be blessid when men shulen curse you, and shulen pursue you, and shulen say all yuel agheins you leeying, for me. Joye yee with yn forth, and glade yee without forth, for your meede is plenteuouse in heuenes; forsothe so thei han pursued and prophetis that weren before you.’”

He did not speak low, but clearly, that all in the hall might hear. There was no attempt to veil *his* colours before his own household or before the world. But then he had the support of Prince Harry's love and friendship.

"Therefore grieve not, neither dread," Sir John went on. "John Badby hath gained that meed. What need we to weep for him? Rather let us rejoice and be glad, gentle Gytha, for verily he is and shall be blessed, now and for evermore."

CHAPTER V.

GYTHA'S NEW HOME.

ABOUT three miles distant from the city of Rochester, rose the stately towers of Coulyng Castle, known in later days as Colinges, or Culinges, and finally as Cowling Castle.

Early in the reign of Richard II., John, Lord Cobham, descendant of a long line of noble and knightly ancestors, obtained permission from the king to build this castle for his use and protection. A right brave and lusty old knight was Sir John,—straightforward, outspoken, kindly, and generous. He made good use of the leave accorded him, and erected a pile, the strength of which caused whispers of jealousy and suspicion to be heard. Thereupon Lord Cobham, in deprecation of any ill purposes which might be imputed to him, caused to be affixed to the eastern tower of the main entrance a certain scroll, bearing his arms, and these quaint lines.

“Knoweth that beth and shall be
That I am made in help of the contre ;
The knowing of whiche thing
This is chartre and witnessing.”

The same year that Coulyng Castle was in course of being built, Lord Cobham, with the assistance of his

friend Sir Robert Knollys, generously erected a stone bridge over the Medway, between Strood and Rochester, for the benefit of the county. He also shewed his attachment to his Church by the founding of a chantry or college for priests at Cobham.

During the reign of Richard II., Lord Cobham, having come prominently forward in an inquiry respecting certain abuses in the government of the country, was impeached for high treason, and narrowly escaped with his life. The sentence of death was actually passed, but it was commuted into imprisonment for life on the isle of Jersey, with forfeiture of all his possessions. On the accession of Henry IV., however, the wheel went round,—Lord Cobham came into power again, and his lost lands were restored to him.

He had one wife, Margaret daughter of Hugh Courtney, Earl of Devonshire, and one daughter named Joan. Both died in his lifetime, but the latter first married a certain Sir John de la Poole, and in her turn left one daughter, named after herself. Madame Joan, the grand-daughter of old Lord Cobham, succeeded to the estates at his death in 1407. By that time she was wedded to her third husband Sir Nicholas Hawberk. Singularly enough there was again only one daughter, named Joan, child of Lady Cobham, and of her second husband Sir Reginald Braybrooke. Sir Nicholas Hawberk died shortly after old Lord Cobham, and the hand of the Lady Joan was then sought and won by her fourth husband, Sir John Oldcastle, of Herefordshire, who, according to the custom of the times, immediately assumed the title of Lord Cobham in right of his wife.

On the afternoon of the day following John Badby's martyrdom, Lady Cobham sat expectantly within her chamber. It was an unusually lofty room, with windows

that commanded a full view of the great courtyard, with the strong portcullised gateway opposite, flanked by its two massive round towers. A carpet of elaborate workmanship covered part of the floor, and the walls were adorned with quaint devices in black and white paint, a curtain of tapestry being hung here and there in honour of the travellers' looked-for return that evening.

The bed was of immense size, having a crimson coverlet and bolster ; and deep pink curtains, worked all over with the Cobham coat-of-arms, depending from the ceiling. At its foot was affixed the usual hutch, chest, or coffer, within which money and valuables were wont to be kept. In the one wide couch-like chair, draped with crimson silk, sat Lady Cobham, and opposite to her, upon a long wooden bench, was seated a row of young ladies, busily embroidering. A faint sound of spinning-wheels and voices came through the closed door which led into the adjoining room.

The Lady Baroness of Cobham might have been about thirty years of age. Her complexion was as brunette in hue as that of Margaret Cobham herself, but her features were small and regular, and her whole face was lighted up by a pair of dark liquid eyes of winning loveliness. Her manners were alike gracious, tender, and stately—the latter more from association and position than by nature. She wore a flowing robe of rich lilac satin, worked over with large gold flowers, and both lined and faced with ermine. The lofty white wings, which rose from her cap on either side, were surmounted by a light gauze veil thrown over them and falling almost to her feet behind. The young ladies before her were dressed in a somewhat similar style, but with different colours and less costly materials.

“Joan—”

"Madame?"

"Thou mayst keep watch for me at yonder window, and list for the horn. I would fain have note of my lord's first arrival."

The youngest of the girls present—hardly, indeed, more than ten or eleven years old, judging from her appearance, rose to do the lady's bidding. A certain undefined something, approaching to resemblance between the two, might have stamped them—and truly so—as mother and daughter. Otherwise the square-built heavy-browed young damoiselle, with her thick lips and half-sullen grey eyes, had little about her in common with the beautiful baroness.

"Think'st thou, madame, they may arrive speedily?" asked a girl, in a black and gold gown, with broad green sash, lifting her eyes from her work.

"Dost wax impatient for a sight of thy brother, eh?" asked the lady.

"Of Arnold—ay—so—" but the answer was not fluent; and a voice from the window said quietly—

"Eleanor Savage loveth not her brother overmuch."

"Joan, thou know'st nought," began Eleanor, in a displeased tone.

"Know I not? Ha! ha!" laughed the child, in a singularly harsh unmirthful tone.

Lady Cobham looked reprovingly; and Joan sank into silence, though she bit her under-lip impatiently.

"For my part, I do desire the return of Margaret—our bright Marguerite—as much as aught else," murmured one of the *chambrières*.

"Truly we have missed bright Margaret's companionship these many months," said Lady Cobham. "Right loth was I to send her away. Methinks we be like to

see her come back in somewhat altered guise, from her long sojourn in those far-off country parts."

"Soothly Margaret will be Margaret, and none other, unto the end of her life," said Eleanor. "In the letter she did write unto me, three months agone, she made boast that her pokes did vie in length with those of Prince Harry himself."

Eleanor lifted slightly her wide fur-lined sleeve, as she spoke. "Mine own sweep not upon the ground—but methinks Margaret will speedily bring us all unto her mark."

"Margaret, and thou also, had best beware and don your gowns with smaller pokes, the next time Master Occleve chanceth to journey hereby," said Lady Cobham. "He hath exercised his poetical wit ere now upon that same matter."

"Oh, ay," and Eleanor laughingly hummed—

"Now hath this land little need of brooms
To sweep away the filth out of the street;
Sen side-sleeves of penniless grooms
Will it up licke, be it dry or weete.'

"True enough, doubtless; but an we did take the poets for our rule as to attire, the king would need to trouble him little with sumptuary laws."

"Mother—mother—I heard no horn, but they be come."

Lady Cobham rose and went to the window.

"They be come—soothly," she said, in a disappointed tone. "And I am too late for to welcome him at the gate, as I had promised me to do. Yonder rides Margaret by his side, and—nay, who is the second fair damoiselle?"

"Saw ye ever a fairer?" ejaculated Eleanor Savage.

" Yet she hath a childlike look, as of one who knoweth not her own charms. Will ye remain here, madame, or go to welcome their coming?"

" Nay I will even meet them ; and thou mayst come likewise. Joan, also—and Isolda—"

She broke off, passed out of the chamber, and swept down the narrow winding stone stairs, with her lofty head-dress and flowing train.

At the door leading into the courtyard, Sir John Oldcastle had just alighted. He was assisting the two young ladies to the ground ; a knightly office towards "the fair" which he would depute to none of his esquires. Then turning, he espied his wife's bright face of greeting.

" Thou hast brought our Margaret sound and safe," said Lady Cobham.

" That have I, my Joan—nor Margaret only. Hast need of another chambrière?"

" An thou wilt," she said, smiling. " Who may the fair damoiselle be? She liketh me well."*

Lord Cobham moved away a few paces, and taking Gytha's cold fingers in his mail-clad hand, he led her kindly forward.

" Thou know'st, at least by name, Joan, mine old sworn brother-at-arms, Sir William Cheyne. He hath given over unto us his one fair daughter—Gytha Cheyne. Wilt have her for thy chambrière, dear dame?"

Lady Cobham laid a hand kindly on Gytha's arm, as the girl sank low in a deep reverence before her.

" Lift up thine een, pretty one—ay, so ; nay, droop them not again so speedily. Soothly, my lord, thou hast gathered me a fair bud in the western wilds of Britain."

* I like her well.

"Tis a bud that droopeth somewhat under the pain of transplantation," said Lord Cobham, rather gravely.

Lady Cobham laid a finger caressingly on Gytha's cheek.

"She liketh me well—she liketh me marvellous well, my lord. Fair Gytha—canst thou love me?"

Gytha looked up in some perplexity, and then made truthful answer.

"Madame, I know ye not yet, but I doubt not I will soon be able."

"Twas verily spoken like unto a little Lollard," said Lady Cobham laughingly.

"Madame, I am a Gospeller," said Gytha steadily.

"Thou art over young for such matters. I will give unto thee my bonny hawk, Maid Marguerite, and thou shalt learn the wonders of the chase, and leave thy Lollardies and Gospellings till thou art older."

Gytha looked wistfully from the dame to Sir John, over whose face something of a shadow had crept.

"I do thank ye, madame," she said slowly. "Your kindness is more than I dare hope to merit. But I am a Gospeller, madame, and my Gospels will I never lay aside."

"Thou art as resolute as my lord himself," said Lady Cobham, with a smiling glance up at Sir John. "An thou be'st likewise as brave and as good, I will have nought in the way of just complaint. Thou shalt have my bonny hawk, Lollard or no Lollard. And now—ye be all weary, and I ask ye to supper in my chamber. What say ye?"

Gytha had been dreading the formal meal in the great hall this first evening, and was not a little relieved to hear Sir John assent to the proposal. They made their way upstairs to the dame's chamber, which to all intents

and purposes was in fact a bedroom only at night, and a parlour during the day. There the knight was divested by Alfgar of his heavy armour; and a table was speedily made and spread by the squires and pages for Sir John and his lady, Gytha and Margaret. The other chambrières had all disappeared to the hall-supper, except the little lady Joan, who was ensconced behind the coffer, half-hidden by the crimson curtain. Nobody knew her to be present, until Gytha, happening to lift her own eyes, caught a glimpse of a pair of angry ones, under lowering brows, gazing steadily at herself. She almost exclaimed aloud in her first surprise, but was glad the next moment that she had not yielded to the impulse. It was no business of hers to draw attention to the matter. She wondered a little secretly, however, at the expression of strong dislike in the child's face. What could have caused it?

Refreshment was by no means unwelcome to the tired travellers, and for a while they seemed more disposed to eat than to talk. Gradually, however, Margaret's gay tongue was set going, and Lady Cobham was at least equally chatty. She left Gytha alone for a while, only watching her with admiring half-solicitous interest; but at length she turned suddenly, and asked of Alfgar—

“Tell me, I pray thee, Alfgar—doth thy fair sister sit ever silent and sober as now?”

Gytha's distressed blush brought a caressing hand again to her cheek.

“Thou art over-timid. Hast never been used to hear thy looks and ways made talk of? Thou wilt have plenty of the same anon as thou goest through life—with thy face! Art always thus grave, gentle one?”

“Methinks Gytha and Alfgar likewise did witness yester-e'en a spectacle, the which may well leave sobered spirits behind,” said Sir John.

Lady Cobham looked curious.

"A spectacle ! Tell me, Gytha, what spectacle might it have been ?"

Gytha raised her eyes, and spoke with some difficulty.

"Madame, 'twas the burning of Master John Badby, for that he was a Gospeller."

Lady Cobham gave a quick involuntary glance towards her husband, and her face flushed crimson, then turned pale as death. "Burning ! and for Lollardy !" she murmured, clasping her hands.

"Thou need'st not to tremble for me, gentle Joan," said Sir John affectionately. "I would that other men might claim such protectors as mine at Court. Nay—rather would I say, they *have* a Protector, even the Mightiest ; and I too do humbly trust I have the same. But truly it meseemeth I have little danger for to fear."

"Thou knowest not what it is to fear ! Oh, to think it may ever come to that—even to that—my lord, I beseech thee, break not thy Joan's heart, with the holding too tightly of these fantasies."

Gytha wondered how he would meet the passionate pleading of the beautiful dame. But he only smiled gravely, and repeated—

"Fantasies ! Nay, surely ; I think not ever to die in defence of a fantasy."

"Clepe them what it pleaseth thee ; but oh, soothly, soothly, they are not worth the dying for, my lord."

"They ! I know not ! I measure not the matter thus. 'Tis not the bare hard doctrines, this way nor that, for the which men die, and for the which I too would yield my life, gentle dame, an it came to the point, and my God did give me grace to endure. 'Tis not the doctrines, but 'tis the Lord Himself of doctrine and of truth. I would die for Him,

meseemeth it, ay ten times, ten times told. 'Tis not the doctrines of themselves, my Joan, but if I be required to assent and conform unto a doctrine, which doth despite unto His truth, and dishonour unto His holy Name, then for His sake, and that alone, I needs must die."

"*Thou*," said Lady Cobham falteringly.

"Ay, verily, if the matter be ever carried thus far," said Lord Cobham calmly. "But disquiet not thyself. My friends at Court be many and powerful. 'Tis a different question, the burning of a churl and the burning of a knight and a baron. Methinks the poor churl, John Badby, had even the best of the matter to-day. But for me—thou need'st not fear."

"And thou, Gytha," said Lady Cobham, turning to her,—" "*Thou*, after witnessing the poor Badby's death agonies —*thou* darest still avow thyself a Lollard!"

"Certes, madame, I am a Lollard, nor could I of a truth avow myself aught else," said Gytha quietly.

"And if it come to that with thee—for thou art neither knight nor baron, nor friend of Prince Harry, nor servant of the king?"

"Madame, I doubt not my God will grant unto me such strength as occasion needeth," said Gytha.

"Think'st thou verily thou could'st ever bear the anguish of the burning?"

Lady Cobham shuddered as she spoke. Gytha lifted her eyes quietly, and opened her lips, but closed them again.

"Speak, fair child, speak," said Lady Cobham impatiently.

"I did but bethink me, madame, of our Lord's words," said Gytha timidly. "'Nyle ye be besie in to the morew, for the morew day shal be besie to itself; sothly it sufficith to the day his malice.'"

"Dost mean the malice of priest and monk? Forsooth, and I marvel not if that be thy thought. But thou art truly Lollard through and through, I fear me, Gytha, with thy little head filled full of Gospel reading. Nay, I say not 'tis not good—" and she gave an arch deprecating look at her husband. "I did bethink me a while since that I was of Lollard stuff mine own self. But these bruitings and stirrings and burnings do waken a sense of caution—and I wis well there are things to be said on the one side as also on the other."

"'Nyl ye dreede hem that sleen the body,' Joan," said Lord Cobham gently.

"Ah, me! I dread them sorely," she said hurriedly. "I would fain be Lollard, but for them, as well thou knowest."

She covered her face with her hands, and burst into tears; but the next instant, with a sudden, almost volatile change of voice and manner, she looked up brightly, and said—

"'Tis all the fair Gytha's doing that we be thus doleful and sorry in our talk this eve. I will ne have no more of it. Gytha, thou must now smile upon us, and Margaret shall even do us to wit of her long sojourn among her western kin."

Margaret, who had been rather out of her element during the conversation for some minutes, was very willing to comply. A cheerful chat followed while the meal continued, for the travellers were hungry, and it did not end speedily. In the midst of a story respecting some past travelling adventures, Margaret, however, broke suddenly off, and exclaimed—

"Joan!"

"What mean'st thou, Margaret?" asked the lady.

Margaret pointed towards the foot of the bed, and Lady

Cobham immediately rose from her seat, and swept thither with her rustling train. Joan rose from her crouching position, and faced her mother with alarmed yet lowering looks.

"What art doing here, Joan?"

"Madame—I was—" and there Joan's voice failed.

"Thou art at thine old tricks again. I have warned thee ere now."

Parents in those days did not "spare the rod," or "spoil the child." Joan's punishment was prompt and sharp, though brief. Then Lady Cobham swept back again to her seat, with her usual grace, and Joan vanished.

An hour later, when Gytha was led upstairs by Margaret to the chamber, in which, with half a dozen of the chambrières, she was to sleep, they found the child sobbing in bed. Gytha pityingly bent over her, and would have spoken a soothing word, but was roughly repulsed. She stepped back, rather hurt, and Margaret came forward.

"Now Joan, little Joan, thou art soothly making much ado, where it needeth not. Better hadst thou have gone when told. What maketh thee so fierce this evening, little cousin?" added Margaret, in a perplexed tone, as Joan sat up in the bed, and looked sullenly across at Gytha, who was moving away.

"Margaret—"and the elder girl came close to the bed, in response to the younger one's gesture. "Margaret,"—and Joan whispered huskily,—“Margaret, think'st thou she be verily so beauteous as my mother saith?”

"Gytha Cheyne? Truly never beheld I a fairer face. Art jealous, little Joan?"

"I love not her face," muttered Joan decisively. "It liketh me ill. My mother hath given to her the bonniest

hawk in all the castle. I tell thee, I will ever hate Gytha Cheyne."

"Thou hadst best get thee to sleep, silly child that thou art, little cousin," was the wisest response which Margaret could make to this unexpected declaration.

CHAPTER VI.

THE CASTLE GARDEN.

ONE sunny April day, just three years later, a party of maidens might have been seen issuing from the gateway of Coulyng Castle. Some of them were walking hand-in-hand, while others had their favourite hawks seated upon their wrists, or little pet dogs running behind and claiming attention. Spring weather was eagerly welcomed after the long dark winter of close confinement within the castle walls. There had been the usual early morning's work at spinning-wheel and embroidery ; and now that dinner was over, the Lady Cobham was sending out her whole party of chambrières to enjoy themselves in the garden.

“And thou wilt not look to see us back till the horns do sound for supper?” Margaret de Cobham said gaily, as she lingered a moment to speak to the baroness, who was standing under the archway to see them off. “And thou wilt not accompany us?”

“Nay, not this day, Margaret. I have already told thee nay.”

“Thou thinkest his lordship mayhap will return ere nightfall?”

“I know not ;” and Lady Cobham sighed. “He wist not when he would come.”

Something of a shade was on her brow.

"Oh, he will come, he will come," said Margaret confidently. "He will remain never a day longer from thee than the king needeth him, dear dame."

"Nay, that wot I well. And truly the young king, in his high and mighty station, needeth wise counsellors, such as my lord. 'Tis not King Harry, Margaret, for he loveth Lord Cobham right well; but 'tis the prelates of this realm who do make my heart to fear."

"Needlessly," said Margaret. "Bethink thee, gentle dame,—these three years be gone by, and albeit there be much talk and do, and no little persecution of men for holding of opinions like unto his, yet hath there been never another burning,—else we know of it not. Methinks if matters have been no worse in the days of King Harry just dead, there remaineth now less fear than ever before. King Harry hath the kindest of hearts, and of himself would not willingly do injury unto a fly."

"Of himself,—of himself,—nay! But go ye now to your sports, all of ye."

"And thou need'st not the companionship of any among us?" asked Margaret rather reluctantly, with a wistful glance towards the group of girls straying away from the drawbridge.

"Margaret, I would fain remain at home to-day. I care not to go into the garden."

Margaret turned impatiently, to encounter Gytha Cheyne's calm grey eyes.

"Forsooth, and wherefore nay?" she demanded.

"I care not for the like pleasures, as thou well knowest. I will not go forth this day, Margaret."

"If *thou* sayest 'will not,' verily mountains may not move thee from thy purpose," said Margaret, with unwonted pettishness. "Save and except that our lady

do lay her commands upon thee. An thou goest not, neither go I. What care I for the pleasuring, if thou art not with me?" And despite the pettishness, there was genuine affection, of no slight degree, in Margaret's tone.

"What carest thou? Soothly, thou carest mightily for the same," smilingly answered Gytha. "Whereas I do love greatly more to sit within doors and to read, than e'en to wander among the trees and flowers."

"What wilt thou, dear dame?" asked Margaret. "Gytha refuseth to quit thy side."

"Gytha, thou may'st go, and *I* will e'en keep my lady-mother company," interposed another and harsher-toned voice, as Lady Cobham hesitated what to answer. A dark heavy-browed girl, of about thirteen or fourteen, pushed forward as she spoke.

Gytha simply waited for a decision.

"Nay, nay, I need not any among ye," said the lady, rather hastily. "Joan, thou hadst best go and seek a game of chess with Thomas Brooke, an he be not gone to the tilt-yard."

"Mother, 'twas not thus thou didst receive the offer of Gytha Cheyne to stay with thee."

The tone was not undutiful, but it was exceedingly sullen.

"Joan, thou art over forward," said the lady coldly. "I am not wont to be called thus to account by mine own child, neither will I submit unto the same. Thou may'st go, and without further debate. Truly, I deny not that I would fain retain gentle Gytha beside me this day, but she hath grown to look thin of late, and 'tis not well that she be ever sitting and studying or working. Thou also wilt go to the gardens, my Gytha, and make me the fairest garland thy hands can weave."

Lady Cobham's eyes rested upon Gytha's face with fond admiration as she spoke. It was hardly surprising that her own child, towards whom her bearing was so different, should suffer from some feeling of jealousy.

"As ye will, madame," Gytha replied simply.

Had Joan not been there she might have pressed and carried her point, but constant tact was needed on her part to avoid anything of a collision between herself and the proud young damsel of the castle. Nor was it pride alone which formed the groundwork of Joan's sensations. Gladly would she have forfeited her rights, as presumptive heiress to her mother's broad lands and stately dower, could she thereby have gained one tithe of Gytha Cheyne's winning power over the hearts of all around her.

"Seest thou, Gytha, how Joan ever misliketh her mother's love for thee?" asked Margaret a little later, when they had reached the beautiful castle garden, situated outside the moat, but surrounded by a lofty wall of its own. Gytha had begun slowly gathering a few blossoms for the garland which Lady Cobham desired, and Margaret walked after her, chatting lightly about various matters.

Gytha lifted her eyes to Margaret for a moment, but did not speak.

"Thou need'st not to use thine een upon me in such reproachful wise. 'Tis a truth, of which none in all the castle be ignorant, that her ladyship loveth thee like to her own child, and loveth her own child like to a chambrière. What marvel! See yonder, how Joan pouteth and scowlmeth over her rose-bush."

"I marvel not that Joan grieveth," said Gytha gravely. "'Tis no matter of complacency unto me, Margaret. Soothly have I oft and oft debated with myself, seeking how I might find wherein mine own conduct had been

Lacking, that I could ever in such unseemly wise displace
a child in her mother's love."

"Wilt know wherein thou hast been lacking? I can speedily tell thee that. Thou hast been lacking in ugliness. Thou hast been lacking in evil humours. Thou hast been lacking in selfish desires. Thou hast been lacking in all faults like to those in which Joan lacketh not."

"Nay, nay, Margaret, thou art over fond—thou knowest me not," said Gytha gently. "'Tis nought of that. I do but fear me I have not rightly acted, or truly this need scarce have been the end."

"I know not what thou callest the *end*. Methinks 'tis more like to a beginning. But enough and enough of this matter. My little cousin liketh me not sufficiently, for that I should waste mine hours in discussing of her merits as compared with thine. Thou hast not brought Maid Marguerite with thee."

"Nay, for I have the making of this garland for Madame. I care not to be ever carrying about of hawks, Margaret."

"For me, I would never sit, neither walk, without my bonny merlin, had I mine own choice," said Margaret. "I do scarce marvel at the monks who love e'en to preach in church* with their hawks upon their wrists."

"I do marvel greatly that any man can dare thus to drag earthly vanities into a house set apart for the worship of God," said Gytha steadily. "'Tis that the monks would have their hearers wis they be of gentle blood, and nought else. Think'st thou that a worthy aim for a man ministering before God unto his people,—albeit methinks the priestly ministering is little as God would have it be?"

* "Womankind in Western Europe." By T. Wright.

"Thou takest matters over gravely, Gytha," was the answer.

"They be grave matters, and matters of mighty import unto thee and me," said Gytha, raising her sweet eyes to Margaret's face. "Would thou could'st weigh things at their rightful worth, Margaret,—mine own dear friend as thou art, though we think not altogether alike concerning such questions."

"Mayhap we do think nearer together than thou knowest," murmured Margaret, a dark shadow creeping over her usually sunny face. "O Gytha,—for all I love thee so, I could fain wish I had never known thee."

"Nay, forsooth, I cannot echo thy wish, Margaret."

"Thou art ever saying words which do clench fast hold upon me, and let me have no peace nor rest. If thou would'st but leave these matters! To what purpose art thou ever striving and striving to make me like unto thine own self. *I* am verily of no stuff for martyrdom, sweet Gytha—albeit I well believe thou mayst be, and trust only thou wilt never need to exercise those powers of endurance which, I doubt me not, are thine."

"If ever martyrdom be my lot, God grant I have other strength than mine own weakness, on which to depend," said Gytha. "Else assuredly I would fail, Margaret."

"*Thou* fail! Never! Would I could think thou would'st—and yet—nay—I could not love thee as now I do, wert thou one whit weaker or liker to other folks."

"Thou little deemest what mine own weakness is."

"*Thou* little deemest what thine own strength is, methinks."

Gytha lifted a slender stick, and snapped it in two.

"My strength is even like to that, Margaret."

"And yet thou fearest not what may one day be?"

"Truly, nay ; for 'tis not mine own grace nor strength on which I do lean."

Margaret was silent a moment, and then only said abruptly, "Thy garland maketh scant advance."

Gytha's sweet low laugh had a hearty ring in it, which was wanting in Margaret's merrier tones. "I had verily forgotten," she said, taking up the flowers which she had just begun to weave into shape. And then with an expression of half consternation, she added : "O Margaret, yonder cometh Arnold Savage. I did hope he would find him full occupation in the tilt-yard for this one day."

"He hath not sufficient skill for to be content there long. Likewise—*thou* art not there."

Gytha made no answer, but went on weaving her flowers with dexterous rapidity, never lifting her eyes from her work. Arnold Savage, in a gaily-flowered surcoat, and with hose of different hues, which gave him a somewhat parti-coloured appearance, strolled up and stood looking at her admiringly.

"Hast nought better to do, Arnold, that thou needs must come and intrude upon our converse?" asked Margaret.

Arnold might have turned out a neat little compliment respecting the suggestion that anything could be *better* than the enjoyment of her and Gytha's society. It did not occur to him to do so, however, and he only said : "Nay, I have had enough of the tilt, and do but seek pleasure of a different sort."

"Hast thou carried away the ring ofttimes to-day?" asked Gytha.

"Truly I would have done so, but that the sun did shine in mine eyes, that I could scarce distinguish the ring as I galloped past."

"'Tis a marvellous thing of Cobham Tilt, that so surely as thou dost go there, the sun shineth upon thine eyes wheresoever thou dost turn, and ever hindereth the display of thy powers," Gytha remarked, seeming to give considerably more attention to the flowers than to the subject in hand.

"Now, thou art verily cruel, Gytha, to be saying of such harsh things with thy gentle voice," said Arnold Savage, in an injured tone.

"Think'st thou his lordship will return to-day?" asked Margaret.

"Nay; what wot I? Thou hadst best inquire thee of Gytha, who hath doubtless learned more of his lordship's affairs than I, through Alfgar. *I* am no favoured squire of Sir John's, albeit I would render him as faithful service as Alfgar himself, were I put to the test."

"I do trust of a surety that thou would'st," said Gytha composedly.

"Wilt have a game of chess, Gytha?" asked Arnold.

"I thank thee, nay; I have these flowers to weave for our lady. Mayhap Joan will favour thee."

"Joan! I thank thee for thy suggestion," said Arnold contemptuously.

"Thy chivalry lacketh somewhat. Joan loveth chess, and needeth a companion. If others fail, 'tis thy duty to fill the vacant post."

"Thou wouldst be as strict a taskmaster as Sir John himself," said Arnold, hoping she would relent; but she merely said—

"Ay, that would I, in the matter of chivalry. I would have ye all to take pattern by my Lord Cobham."

Arnold stood looking idly for some minutes at the steady self-possessed motions of Gytha's hands, as she placed flower after flower in her garland. There was no

extra tint of colour in the fair cheeks, and the drooped eyelashes never even quivered, in sign of self-consciousness. Arnold could not discover from her face that she was in the slightest degree aware of his attentions. He grew tired of silence.

"Hast heard the last bruit, Gytha, concerning the late king, his grace?"

"I care not for bruits, Arnold," was the response; but Margaret's curiosity was stronger, and she said,—

"Nay; let us to wete."

"'Tis said he was a leper for years gone, and that his body did so contract under the disease, that at the last 'twas scarce one cubit in length."

"Methinks the kingly dignity would have sat somewhat ill upon so little a body," said Gytha quietly.

"I do assure thee folks do believe the same," said Arnold.

"Mayhap. There be scarce aught unlikely in this world which folks be slack to believe," said Gytha. "Thy chivalry needeth no longer to be put to the test, Arnold. Here cometh one who will do my bidding."

"Thy bidding! Nay, if it be *thy* bidding, I will go unto the world's end," said Arnold eagerly.

"Thou would'st go unto the world's end, mayhap, for thou lovest the thought of adventure; but thou wilt not please a maiden with chess, since it liketh thee not. I call not *that* chivalry, Arnold. Thomas Brooke, I have a word to say unto thee."

A tall young page, who was wandering past, casting a shy glance on the two girls as he went, sprang forward in answer to the summons.

"Hast thou aught in hand to do which may not be left?"

"I am even at your service, Madame Gytha," answered

the boy, with the courtly submission which every page in the Cobham household was trained to display towards "the fair," as ladies were then denominated.

"If I mistake not, thy friend Joan standeth in need of a partner for chess. Thou lovest the game, Thomas."

"I would love aught I could do for *thee*," said the boy wistfully.

"'Tis for me! I love not to see Joan wandering alone thus among the trees. See if thou canst win her to laughter, Thomas."

The boy darted away like an arrow; and, immediately after, a voice called in the distance—

"Arnold Savage! Arnold Savage! haste thee hither!"

"'Tis even a trick to win me from thy side," said Arnold impatiently. "I half bethink me I will not go."

"Thou art elsewhere required, and I require thee not," said Gytha. "I would advise thee, Arnold, 'tis not wise that thou dost not obey."

"Arnold Savage! Arnold Savage!" and a deeper tone followed—

"Master Savage! dost not hear? Sir John desireth thine attendance!"

Arnold was gone without another moment's delay. Gytha put down her wreath.

"Margaret, did I hear aright? Was it that Sir John did need him?"

"Nay; I think not." And presently Margaret added—"Gytha, what maketh thee so to trouble thy head or heart—I know not which—with the doings of Joan?"

"I love not to see her aught but happy," said Gytha.

"What matter unto thee? 'Tis her own ill humours and evil spleen which do make her that she be not happy. *Thou* canst do nought for her."

"Nay, she will scarce speak with me, else would I

dearly love to seek to win her to a more joyous spirit. I can do nought, save through others. Margaret—oh, see —'tis Alfgar!"

Gytha sprang to her feet, her whole face illuminated with joy, while flowers and garland dropped unheeded to the ground. Margaret stooped to pick them up, showing herself for once the most composed person of the two.

Taller but scarcely less slight than he had been of old, though the three years just past had added to his manly strength and breadth of figure, Alfgar Cheyne, in coat of mail and sober-hued surcoat, strode over the grass, doffing his helmet as he came.

"Hast a word of welcome to give me, Margaret?" he asked.

"Forsooth, and thou art mightily bespattered with mud," said Margaret, the laughter in her eyes contradicting the affected care with which she drew aside her fur-lined robe. "Hast been rolling with thy charger in a bog?"

"Nay, but we have ridden fast through mud and mire, and slackened rein for nought which lay in our path. Sir John did determine to be here at an earlier hour than we be wont to arrive."

"Wherefore, Alfgar?" asked Gytha, as she stood with her little hand resting on her brother's arm.

"I can scarce tell thee, save that he was impatient again to see our fair dame, after these many weeks apart—and likewise that he hath divers things to tell her."

"'Twas not thy voice which did summon Arnold?" said Margaret.

"Mine! Nay, I left not Sir John 'till Arnold was at hand to his bidding. 'Twas his lordship's own desire that I should seek Gytha speedily."

"He did not perchance desire thee to seek and fetch me likewise," said Margaret dryly.

"He did not—methinks—mention thee by name—but doubtless—"

Alfgar looked distressed at having to make the answer, but Margaret broke into a merry laugh.

"Thou needst not look so grave—neither thou nor Gytha. *I* am not Joan, to wear sour looks for that all love to see our Gytha come and go. I will e'en welcome my cousin, Sir John, myself, ne'theless that he hath not called for me. Thou and Gytha would fain have a brief minute of private converse. Nay, nay, deny it not—'tis writ upon thy face."

"I would fain not be misunderstood by thee, Margaret," began Alfgar hastily, but she gracefully retreated a few steps, singing a snatch of an old song or poetical romance—

" 'Bleve* to soper they dyght,
Both squire and knyght.
They daunsed and revelide that nyght :
In harte were they blythe."

"I pray thee listen," said Alfgar, at the first break.

"Small revelling doth our castle ever behold; but doubtless squire and knight will be blythe at heart this even," said Margaret lightly. "I will intrude upon ye no longer."

"Thou dost mistake, Margaret," said Alfgar hastily.

"What! Hast nought to tell unto Gytha which mine ears may not hear?"

Alfgar hesitated for a moment; and she took advantage of that single instant to drop a ceremonious reverence, and hasten away.

* Quickly.

"Thou wilt meet her again at the supper," said Gytha, in a consoling tone, as Alfgar looked gravely at her. "She loveth much to exercise thy forbearance. Hast thou aught of weight to tell me, Alfgar! I too could deem that there is somewhat out of the common writ upon thy face."

CHAPTER VII.

SIR ROGER ACTON.

“I KNOW not if it be writ upon my face or nay, but Margaret so far was right, that I have somewhat to tell thee,” said Alfgar.

“Somewhat which thou wouldst fain she did not hear?”

“She can scarce avoid the hearing of it speedily: but I at least would not willingly be the one to avise her of evil tidings.”

“Evil unto whom?” asked Gytha, with a slight change of colour.

“Unto all who do love Lord Cobham. Gytha, I fear me there be the first cloudlets of a coming storm gathering overhead.”

“How, and in what wise?”

“The archbishop hath determined upon a great and universal synod of the clergy of England, to be held this summer at St. Paul’s.”

“‘Tis not for the first time. Hast nought worse to tell me?”

“‘Tis said they do but seek to work a moderate and wholesome reformation of the English Church; desiring to look into abuses, and alter such things as need to be altered. So far, might they do worse. Doubtless

there is room for reformation, and room to spare.
But—”

Alfgar made a long pause, gazing down abstractedly upon the garland at their feet. Gytha quietly picked it up, and began giving the few finishing touches which it required.

“ But those who know somewhat of that which goeth on behind the outside face of these matters, they do maintain that Master Arundel hath a more special purpose in the gathering of this synod. They do declare, Gytha, with firm conviction, that he purposeth the entire overthrowal of the Lollard party, and that he meditateth in sober earnest an attack upon our noble lord, Sir John, as leader of the Lollards.”

“ An attack in what wise?” asked Gytha again.

“ Dost need telling? Master Arundel hath one sure and sovereign cure for Lollardy—and that a remedy both brief and warm. Bethink thee of John Badby.”

One long shiver ran through Gytha. “ Oh, nay! for him! O Alfgar! nay—” she murmured involuntarily.

“ I say not 'twill come to that. Did I deem it were like to do so, I could scarce speak thus calmly of the matter. Sir John hath friends both many and powerful. But truly it meseemeth that dark days lie ahead, and somewhat of trouble and persecution at the least.”

Then with a sudden change of voice, as they began to walk together towards the castle, he asked—

“ Think'st thou Margaret did show pleasure or nay at the seeing of me?”

“ I was truly thinking more of thy face than of Margaret's. *Thou* didst show pleasure at the seeing of her.”

Alfgar laughed a little, and remarked—“ Lord Cobham will marvel what detaineth thee and me.”

“ ‘Twas thy tidings, and not mine own will to loiter. Alfgar, I have a letter to show thee from our mother, brought hither but three weeks since by a pilgrim on his road to Canterbury.”

“ Is she well? And my father, how with him now?”

“ He gaineth not in health; but my mother is well, and telleth me many matters of interest concerning our dear home. I do oftentimes long to see it once again, Alfgar.”

“ ‘Tis more of a home to thee than to me. I desire nought but to remain ever with Sir John. Mine own home did shelter me for seven years, but Sir John Oldcastle hath been more than father unto me for seven years twice told.”

Leaving the garden behind them, they passed over the drawbridge, and under the gateway into the courtyard. A busy scene of tramp and clang and bustle awaited them there. Lord Cobham had returned, not only with his own troop, and a goodly following of gentlemen, wont to collect under his banner; but he had also been joined in London by Sir Reginald Cobham, head of the Sterborough branch of the family, who with his men-at-arms had come to pay a brief visit at the castle, *en route* for Canterbury.

It was no wonder therefore that the courtyard presented an unwonted scene of confusion. Men-at-arms were attending to their horses and accoutrements; knights and squires were standing in groups or hurrying to and fro; voices high and low were eagerly asking or imparting news of the outer world. Gytha swept quietly through the throng by her brother’s side, responding with a smile to the various courtesies which greeted her appearance, and altogether ignoring the inquisitive glances of those amongst the new comers to whom she was unknown.

"What clepe* ye yonder maiden?" demanded a stout knightly figure of middle age, who was talking to a circle of eager listeners.

"I wis not, Sir Roger," replied the younger knight, to whom the question was more immediately addressed. "Soothly I do behold somewhat of resemblance between her face and that of the young squire by her side, who seemeth ever to watch with such assiduity for the bidding of Sir John Oldcastle. I have noted him well on the journey hitherward. He hath a right comely visage of his own. But 'tis nigh upon six years since last I did come hither. Certes, yonder fair vision was not wont in those days to flit through the castle-yard—though methinks the young squire I can now dimly recall."

"They be brother and sister," said the page, Thomas Brooke, advancing a step in his hurry to supply the desired information. "Master Cheyne is his lordship's foster-son, and dear unto him like unto his own."

"I could have told *thee* that," said Sir Roger. "Master Cheyne and I be no strangers, though his sister I wis not."

"She was even sick and in bed the last time ye did come, Sir Roger," said Thomas. "Otherwise—"

"Cheyne!" broke in the younger knight. "It me seemeth that the name to me is not wholly unfamiliar."

"Sir William Cheyne of Herefordshire. Ye have heard of him, doubtless. He hath suffered from sore weakness the last three years, or nigh thereupon; else would we see him here even now."

"Ha! the sworn brother-at-arms of his lordship! Doubtless *he* too lolleth."[†]

The last words came impatiently; and without waiting for an answer, the knight turned to Thomas Brooke, and

* Call.

† Verb *To loll*—to profess Lollard doctrines.

said—"Thou wert speaking, and I cut thee short. What wert saying, lad? Yonder fair damsel was sick, and in bed, otherwise—otherwise thou didst not conclude."

"Otherwise had Sir John Acton never lived till now in ignorance of the fairest among our lady's maidens," said the boy.

"Hold! thy tongue runneth apace, Sir Page," exclaimed the young knight. "I dissent from thee utterly. I will ever maintain the beauty of the Lady Eleanor Culpepper, as surpassing the charms of *thy* fair lady-love."

"Verily, Sir Reginald, I deem not myself—a poor page—worthy to aspire thus high," said Thomas Brooke, colouring deeply. "But truly in all the household I know none—neither the Damoiselle Eleanor Culpepper nor any other—whose charms may rank with those of our lady's most favoured maiden, Dame Gytha."

"Thou wilt need to make good thy words at the point of the lance. Hast thy lady's colours to display? I challenge thee to single combat à l'outrance this even in the castle-yard. There lieth my gage!"

Saying which, Sir Reginald Cobham laughingly flung his heavy glove to the ground. Thomas sprang forward and picked it up with an eagerness which showed something more of feeling than would lie in the mere appreciation of a joke.

"Thou dost agree? So be it. Save that in consideration of thy tender years, and certain inequality alike of size and strength, 'twill be needful awhile to defer our deadly combat."

"I would I were equal unto ye this even, Sir Reginald," said the boy earnestly.

"Thou wilt grow! Thou wilt grow!" said Sir Reginald, laughing heartily. "Sir Roger, these sprigs be

marvellous upstart in their inclinations. If such be results of Lollard training in a Lollard household—”

“Tut, Sir Reginald ! Think’st thou there be any Catholic household in this land, where youths of gentle blood be brought together for knightly training, and where yon glove would have been suffered to lie idle ? Would’st thou even fain have it so ?”

“Thou speaketh sooth ! There *be* things which I desire to see otherwise, but not this. Thou art a lad of spirit, Sir Page, and wilt one day, I doubt not, win thy spurs. What is thy name ? Thomas Brooke—ha ! of the Brookes of County Somerset. And thine age ? Thirteen this day ? Nay, thou art a well-grown lad ! Canst tell me aught of my sister, the Damoiselle Margaret ?”

“Sir Reginald, the Lady Margaret and the Lady Gytha be like unto sisters in heart,” said Thomas Brooke.

Another hearty laugh. “Then the Lady Gytha and I will even of a necessity be like unto brother and sister. My gage will scarce be needed. Good even to ye, Sir Page ! I will away to behold with mine own e’en the charms of these fair ladies. Sir Roger, will ye also come ?”

Sir Roger Acton nodded a half-assent, but he did not move with any great alacrity, and evidently had something else in his mind. He was speedily left behind by the quicker movements of his companion ; and as Sir Reginald disappeared within the hall, Sir Roger came to a standstill and looked about him. Then he shook his head slightly, as if answering his own thoughts, and again moved on a few paces. A second time he paused and cast around a scrutinizing glance. Just at that moment Alfgar appeared through a turret door at a little distance, and Sir Roger started forward.

"Ha! 'tis thou I did desire to see. Master Cheyne, rest awhile till I can overtake thee."

Alfgar turned back instantly. "Were ye in quest of me, Sir Roger?"

"Ay. Canst spare me a brief space for converse, Sir Squire?"

"Lord Cobham needeth me not, and supper will not be yet awhile. Have ye aught to say which all around may not hear?" added Alfgar, prompted to the question by something in Sir Roger's manner.

"That have I. Thou art a shrewd guesser, Master Cheyne. Wilt thou come with me to the keep? Me-thinks we shall find ourselves there unmolested, as we could scarce be elsewhere."

Alfgar agreed at once, wondering a little what Sir Roger could have to communicate. They made their way together to the massive detached tower which formed the keep—always the strongest position in the castle, and the last resort of a distressed garrison. Up the dark spiral staircase, round and round, higher and higher, they went—Alfgar's light footfall coming after the heavier tread of Sir Roger. Here and there a narrow oilet, for the use of a bow and arrows in time of war, admitting a ray of light, and here and there a landing-place, with one or two small rooms whose only windows still were oilets, broke in upon the monotony of the ascent. But at length the summit was gained, and the two stood upon the top, side by side, gazing over the network of wall and towers, and the busy bustling court below.

"'Tis a marvellous strong building, this goodly nest of Sir John's," remarked Sir Roger Acton, suddenly breaking silence.

"I deem it not one whit too strong," rejoined Alfgar.

"Sir John will ever use it in the cause of right, and none other."

"Mayhap! mayhap! Thou art young, Master Cheyne."

"Sir Roger, I came not hither to hear words to the disparagement of my noble lord," said Alfgar firmly.

"Nor have I called thee for that purpose. Disparagement!—tut! Doth the lad think none ken his lordship save himself? I ween right well that a nobler than Sir John hath scarce ever trod this earth. Will that suffice thee?"

Alfgar's grey eyes looked steadily at the knight for a single instant, and then he simply said—

"'Tis sooth! I await your commands, Sir Roger."

"Forsooth and thou mayest await them awhile longer. I have no commands to lay upon thee, else had I spoken them plainly without delay. I did but desire converse with thee. Thou hast Sir John's confidence, as hath none other."

A slight gesture of polite response was all the answer he received.

"Thou art marvellous cautious for one so young. Wilt thou hear what I have to say, or nay, Master Cheyne? I desire not to force it upon thee—albeit I do verily deem the same to be for thy lord's advantage."

"Aught for the advantage of Lord Cobham I am ready to hear or to do," said Alfgar, at once.

"Ay, but thou canst not trust me to be even the same."

"I see not that I am called upon for to decide in that matter," said Alfgar quietly. "I am but squire, and ye a knight over me. I wis well that you love Sir John."

"'Tis an admission—even thus far," said Sir Roger, half-laughing. "But now, Sir Squire—for we may be any

moment called hence—how deemest thou of public affairs as they do now stand?"

"I deem that they who think like unto us, Sir Roger, be scarce like to go on long in such quiet wise as of late years," said Alfgar.

"Thou hast ears of sufficient keenness for to detect the distant mutter of a storm presently to descend upon our heads? 'Tis well thou hast. There be many who do neither see nor hear."

"Master Arundel hath a bitter grudge against Lord Cobham, yet I think not he can do aught while King Harry remaineth my lord's fast friend."

"Trust not overmuch unto that. These Churchmen have mighty power in their hands, and they do dearly love to exercise the same."

"Think ye there lieth danger ahead for Sir John?" asked Alfgar.

"That do I! Danger! I tell thee, Master Cheyne, ere many months be passed, the Lollards of this country are like to be in evil case, save and except—"

"Ay?" said Alfgar, in a questioning tone, as he paused.

"Thou art young, yet art thou discreet," said Sir Roger Acton musingly. "Canst keep a secret when 'tis needful, Master Cheyne?"

"If it be agreeable unto my conscience, and dutiful unto my lord."

"I believe thee. Thou must let fall no word of *this* secret, Sir Squire."

"Sir Roger, I ask not to hear it; but if needful I can well keep unto myself whatsoever thou lettest me to wete of."

"'Tis nought,—'tis nought—save a thought," said Sir Roger quickly. "Hast heard of the schedules

which men do post up upon London church-doors these days?"

"Mine own e'en did see one, purporting for to be of Lollard origin. The writer made boast that this country did hold over one hundred thousand of faithful Gospellers, and that they needed but the word of command to start into active warfare against their sovereign and their countrymen. Mine eyes did read the words, and my cheeks did blush for the mal-advised utterances which may work but ill to our party."

"Thou mistakest! thou mistakest!" said Sir Roger Acton impatiently. "'Tis needful that the Catholics should learn we be not a flock of defenceless sheep, standing for to be slaughtered, with no word to utter nor sword to uplift in our own righteous defence."

"Methinks Master Wickliffe did hold other doctrines than that of thine, Sir Roger," said Alfgar gravely. "What deem ye *he* would have said to the schedule of which I do speak?"

"Neither Master Wickliffe nor any other man, Catholic nor Lollard, living nor dead, hath the keeping of my conscience," said Sir Roger. "A wondrous wise and godly man was Master Wickliffe, yet in these matters I wot well I would not have agreed with him."

"What think ye, Sir Roger, of the example of Christ our Lord?" asked Alfgar, after a little pause. "He saith unto us, 'I am mylde and meek in herte.' And when Judas the betrayer did come unto Him with deceitful kiss, He did but answer in all gentleness unto him. And when Peter would have fought for to defend his Master, Christ saith unto him, 'Turne the swerd in to his place; sothely all that shulen take swerd shulen perishe by swerd.'"

"I say this, Master Cheyne, that ne for Peter, an

apostle of our Lord, neither for Master Wickliffe, a minister of our Lord, was it meet that they should carry the sword, under any pretence whatsoever. But for men of war—for members of the noble order of knighthood, like unto Sir John Oldcastle and I myself—’tis altogether a different matter.”

“I grant ye there is a difference,” said Alfgar. “ Yet —methinks—”

“Thou shalt have verse for verse, Sir Squire. What think’st thou of this?—‘Nyl yee deme that I cam to sende pees in to erthe; I cam not to sende pees in to erthe, but swerd.’”

“Verily a truth lieth in those words, which hath come to pass,” said Alfgar. “But I would scarce read in them a command unto all Christians to go fight against men for Christ; neither for subjects to be rising up against their king, for Christ’s religion.”

Sir Roger sat silently for a minute or two, with downward bent eyes.

“I know not if it be but wasted time to commune with thee longer,” he said. “ Yet I would fain have had the working of thine influence on my side.”

“On thy side! Against whom?”

Sir Roger passed over the question, and asked another.

“Wilt answer me this, Master Cheyne? If on some day yet to come thou shalt see Lord Cobham in danger to life and liberty, and thine arm perchance may rescue him; wilt thou be content to reason thus with thyself, and stand calmly by to see him overpowered and borne away, e’en though it be by command of king and prelates?”

“I would sooner die,” said Alfgar involuntarily. “My life for his life, or my liberty for his liberty, would weigh to me as nothing for the love which I do bear unto him.”

Sir Roger nodded, well content.

“Thou speakest sooth, I doubt not, else would I deem

thy knightly training somewhat wasted on thee. Thou would'st *not* then will that all Gospellers should meekly deliver up their lives, like unto sheep or oxen at the slaughter?"

Alfgar hesitated.

"I would not that there be any uprising against the rulers of the country," he said steadily.

"Thou would'st not? But an the king's soldiers do one day come for to carry away thy lord unto a dungeon, and thou resistest with sword or lance—what call'st thou *that?*"

Alfgar's knitted brows looked grave, and his half-smile following had something of perplexity about it.

"Certes, Sir Roger, I fear me mine own line of argument will scarce stand scrutiny. Yet this wis I firmly, that never would I dare join in open rebellion against the king of this realm, albeit in defence of Lollardy. But neither would I, under any circumstances whatsoever, seeing my lord in danger, stand idly by without the lifting of sword or lance in his defence. If the two be alike to ye, I know not how I am to make ye look upon them with mine eyes; but to me the dividing line is both strong and clear."

"Thou art scarce yet more than a lad," said Sir Roger, rising from his seat and speaking pleasantly. "Awhile hence thou wilt look somewhat differently upon these matters. For to-day, I may not now tarry longer to say more unto thee of that which I would have uttered. Sir John Oldcastle will even deem me uncourteous to remain thus apart from him and his company."

If Sir Roger expected any attempt on his companion's part, to discover more concerning that which seemingly he had nearly communicated, he was disappointed. Alfgar immediately agreed to the move, and rose with an alacrity which showed no particular desire to prolong the conversation.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CASTLE SUPPER.

AT the hour of six, a blast of horns summoned the household of Coulyng Castle, and the concourse of guests, to assemble for supper in the great hall.

A magnificently-carved wooden screen, huge in size and massive in make, separated this apartment from the entrance-lobby, and on the inner side was heavily decorated with coats-of-arms and trophies of the chase. The emblazoned timbers of the lofty roof, and the various armorial bearings which showed upon the stained-glass windows, all spoke in plain terms of the pride and the dignities of the noble Cobham family.

At one end of the hall might have been seen a heavy piece of oaken furniture, richly covered with gilt, and usually denominated the "court-cupboard." Within it was kept all the family gold and silver plate, including salvers, drinking-cups, dishes, and numerous ornamental pieces of great value used for display on grand occasions. Upon the dais stood a *table dormant*, the name given to a fixed table, which was in those days quite an innovation. The *table dormant* stretched across the upper extremity, and two long tables, formed of the usual boards upon trestles, were placed "banquet-wise" down the body of the hall.

Between these two narrow tables stood the *rere-dosse*

exactly in the centre, with some massive logs of wood upon andirons. No wreaths of smoke, however, curled upwards towards the lantern-shaped aperture in the roof overhead, which took the place of a modern chimney. A fire was unnecessary those warm spring days—and indeed our ancestors were by no means disposed to be at any time self-indulgent in such matters. The floor was covered with tolerably clean rushes, over which prowled, unheeded, cats and dogs innumerable, amongst the legs of the assembled guests. They were permitted to pick up all rejected bits thrown to the ground, and no doubt came in for a liberal allowance of food ; but it was a point of good breeding that no notice should be taken of such animals during the time of meals.

A hanging of costly tapestry adorned the wall at the upper end, behind the great chair of honour. Here, as in Sir William Cheyne's manor, there was but one chair, benches being supplied to the remainder of those present. On one side of the hall were the stained-glass windows, raised a considerable distance from the floor ; on the other side was the screen of division, having several lofty archways of entrance through it, and the minstrels' gallery above, built outwards over the lobby. Three or four musical retainers, and two or three wandering minstrels who had turned up opportunely, were seated there, harp in hand, waiting till their services should be required.

At the first sound of the horns, all who were not already in the hall speedily found their way thither, and were shown their appointed places, whether on the dais or down below. It was a goodly and varied company there assembled. The Cobham household itself, from the baroness downward, through all the grades of damoiselles and damoiseaux — chambrières and waiting-maidens, squires and pages—and of family retainers, servants, and

men-at-arms, was, to say the least, not insignificant in point of numbers. Their numbers were however greatly swelled by the numerous guests and knightly followers of Lord Cobham who had accompanied him home, bringing each his own followers also with him. Lastly, there was the usual almost daily gathering of stray travellers, who had turned into the castle on their way, secure of a night's ungrudging hospitality.

The benches being crowded with a hungry assemblage, all seated and gazing patiently upon the bare boards in front of them, the ceremony of washing came next. The ewer, whose proper office it was, being a serving-man, dressed in a short jacket and black hosen, bearing a basin and jug, and followed by a second attendant in a long gown, carrying a towel, now made his appearance. He proceeded up the body of the hall, and holding his basin beneath the fair hands of Lady Cobham, poured water over them from his jug, and then called his attendant's towel into requisition. This operation being repeated with much deliberation in the case of every individual at the upper table, occupied a considerable time. The lavatory outside had happily served beforehand for the greater number of those in the body of the hall, otherwise the business must have been almost interminable.

Meanwhile, squires, pages, and serving-men were hard at work preparing for the coming meal. Snowy cloths were spread with exceeding care, so that no unsightly fold or wrinkle might anywhere be visible. Three stately salt-cellars, in the form of silver ships, upon massive stands, were borne in with much ceremony, and placed, one upon each table. In the houses of the great, wine-cups were not usually supplied all round, but each guest called for wine as he needed it, and the cup was immediately washed and restored to the court-cupboard till again required.

Knives and spoons, and the invariable round *trancoirs*, or trenchers of coarse bread, were however given to all present. Lady Cobham and two or three of the principal guests had silver platters under their trenchers, but this was a luxury.

Preparations having advanced thus far, grace was reverently uttered—not in Latin, but in English—by one of the recently arrived guests, a sparely-built clerical-looking man at the upper table; and then supper began. A modern housewife might feel some embarrassment at such an unexpected incursion of hungry visitors, and rather at a loss how to supply them all with food. Not so the Lady Cobham. With the help of her matchless manciple,* and her stately maître d'hotel, who now paraded the hall in flowing robes, keeping a general oversight respecting the meal, she might indeed, had she received longer notice, have presented a more sumptuous banquet. But the mere ordinary supper-table, with some increase in quantities, and the addition of a course of *entremets*, would be considered a royal board of provisions in these days.

Of course there was a great deal of waste. Prodigality was the order of the times in all noble households. Plenty was indeed an absolute necessity, for the keeping of such open house and unbounded hospitality as was to be found in olden castles, and plenty easily degenerated into extravagant profuseness. A regiment of idle beggars daily received sustenance at the castle gates, from the remains of the hall table. Although Lord Cobham himself strongly affected the simplicity of life, taught and practised by the Lollards generally, still he could not easily break through the old and established customs of Coulyng Castle. He was much away from home, and Lady Cobham was accus-

* Clerk of the kitchen, or purveyor of provisions.

tomed to reign. Simplicity there was, as compared with other knightly households of the day, but there was lavish hospitality likewise.

A fresh blast of horns announced the arrival of the first course. Headed by two squires of the pantry—one of the regular grades by which young men of gentle birth rose towards the final goal of knighthood,—several valets entered in formal procession, bearing dishes of beef, mutton, and veal; “messes” of various descriptions; and roast beef and chickens impaled, steaming, upon wooden spits. These were received one by one into the hands of the *affeur*, whose business it was to arrange them in due order upon the tables. For the knights and ladies and guests of gentle birth, the viands were then carved by the “Squires of the Table,” and handed to each in turn, according to his or her degree. In the case of “messes” of pottage, where the bread trenchers would not suffice, plates were supplied—not one to each person, but one to every couple. This almost universal custom necessitated the careful placing of relations or particular friends side-by-side.

The more substantial meat course having come to an end, the tables were entirely cleared by the busy waiters, and fresh white table-cloths were spread; while the harpists played various sweet tunes in the gallery above.

Again the procession of squires and valets advanced from the kitchen, bearing this time a course of *entremets*—pastry, jellies, and whatever else the castle could produce at so short a notice. The ceremonious wine-cup was then served round, every one arose, grace was said, and a dessert of fruit and sweetmeats was handed about to the standing assemblage. Immediately afterwards, the occupants of the upper table marched in orderly procession from the hall to the neighbouring withdrawing-

room, leaving their hungry attendants to obtain a share of the ample provisions.

Lady Cobham and one of her principal guests being seated side-by-side in the velvet chair, the remaining guests and the castle chambrières disposed themselves about the room, as best they might, on cushioned benches or on window-seats. Gytha made her way to a quiet corner, after her wont, and was standing there, leaning against the rich tapestry, when Margaret Cobham came up.

"Now, Gytha—sweet truant Gytha—I could not be think me where thou hadst flown. What art thou meditating upon so soberly?"

"'Tis close upon bedtime, Margaret."

"Canst say in truth *that* was the subject of thy thoughts?"

"'Twas rather a passing utterance," Gytha answered.
"But methinks it groweth late."

"Thou art not wont thus willingly to hasten thy retirement," said Margaret half-sarcastically.

"I am in no haste," responded Gytha. "Sir John Beverley will doubtless give unto us a Gospel reading ere we part, and I do greatly desire to hear him."

"Gytha, thou must beware how thou speakest to my brother of these matters," said Margaret hurriedly, in a low voice. "These recreant priests do anger him sorely."

"Recreant!" Gytha repeated.

"Thou need'st not to look thus reproachful! I use but the word which Reginald would use. He loveth not Sir John Beverley, nor any other of his class, nor of Lord Cobham's preaching 'poor priests.' I ask not of thee that thou shouldst deny aught that thou believest, but I do ask caution of thee, Gytha, for my sake."

"I deem not I be lacking in caution," said Gytha, half-smiling.

" Mayhap ! But thy caution is of a kind which landeth thee oftentimes farther ahead than he who maketh more reckless advance in the first instance."

" I am not like to have much need for caution in the matter of thy brother."

" More like than thou thinkest. He desireth converse with thee greatly ; but Eleanor Culpepper holdeth him like to a hound in a leash. I love not Eleanor Culpepper, Gytha. How proud she looketh now to have my brother by her side, while we forlorn damsels do wait vainly for our hungry squires."

" I am in no haste, save for Alfgar," said Gytha.

" And I—certes—not for him !" said Margaret, with a slight blush which contradicted her words. " What now, Joan ; art listening to what concerneth thee not ?"

Joan looked in a better humour than was usual with her, and did not even frown in response. " Nay ; I care not what thou and Gytha be talking of," she said. " Mayhap thou may'st care more for what Sir Roger Acton and I have been even now saying."

Margaret exchanged an amused glance with Gytha at the self-importance of the words ; but Gytha checked her own smile almost before it appeared, and asked kindly—

" What hath he told thee, Joan ?"

" 'Twas not he that did tell me, but I that did tell him. He was asking of me respecting ye all—and whom ye each did most affect of the damoiseaux. ' Certes,' quoth I unto him, ' my future knight is Thomas Brooke, and no other ; and he declarereth he will ever be loyal and faithful unto me ? ' " Joan's eyes shot a sharp distrustful glance at Gytha, and she paused a moment.

" I deem not Thomas Brooke to be of a nature otherwise than faithful," said Gytha. " What said Sir Roger Acton, Joan ?"

Joan reddened a little.

"Oh, he did grin somewhat upon me, and say we were both over youthful. I do greatly mislike Sir Roger Acton when he putteth on the look of which I do speak. Next he did make inquiry of me concerning thee, Margaret, and Gytha—with my mother standing by. And I did couple with your names those of Alfgar Cheyne and of Arnold Savage, whereat he showed well content."

"Thou art over forward, Joan," said Margaret, looking annoyed.

"My lady-mother deemeth otherwise," said Joan, rather maliciously. "Sir Roger did look unto her, and she made answer—'Joan speaketh sooth, Sir Roger. 'Tis an old desire of my lord that his foster-son and our bright Margaret be one day wedded. And for the matter of Arnold Savage, fair Gytha doth indeed avoid of him at the present, but ere long I will even bring her unto the point, and she shall be his.' 'Twas said in my mother's most resolute tone, and Sir Roger did make further inquiry, and my mother 'spoke right heartily of Arnold Savage, as a comely and [promising youth, with good possessions."

Joan stopped, and looked curiously at Gytha, to see how the information would be received. She had flushed crimson at the first moment, but her colour was gone now, and she merely said in her gravest tone—

"Joan, thou hast done wrongly in repeating to our ears that which thy mother had no thought for us to hear: But for the wrong I could verily thank thee for thy timely warning."

"'Tis a marvel to me wherefore thou mislikest Arnold Savage," said Joan, ignoring the rebuke. "Alfgar himself sheweth not a more chivalrous demeanour than Arnold—on occasion."

"Thy last words do supply the reason thou needest, Joan," said Margaret. "'Tis because Arnold Savage keepeth his chivalry but for occasions, that he meriteth not to be named in the same day with one whose chivalry is part and parcel of his very self."

"Methinks there be words in thy speech, with which both my mother and Alfgar Cheyne should be made acquainted," said Joan.

"As thou wilt," said Margaret haughtily; "only be thou well ware that thou repeatest in faithful wise. Thou wilt gain nought, Joan, by thy childish meddling in these matters. Keep thee to thy chess and thy hawk and thy devoted page, and all is right; but mine affairs concern thee not, neither do Gytha's."

Joan looked affronted, and walked away, while Margaret glanced half-anxiously at her friend. "Gytha, thou wilt not be over troubled by this," she said kindly. "I doubt not but Joan hath reported more than was spoken."

"I know not," said Gytha. "'Tis but putting into plain words a fear which hath haunted me of late."

"Thou need'st not to fear. Lady Cobham will ever consider first thy happiness."

"She deemeth this for my happiness."

"Nay, we will even strive to open her eyes unto the truth."

"Think'st thou I have not striven?"

"Mayhap. And verily my fair cousin loveth for to have her own will. Yet in this matter I do think she will relent. She would not wilfully grieve thee, Gytha."

Gytha shook her head silently. She had not much trust in that line of argument.

"'Tis in a measure thine own fault," said Margaret. "Thou hast not alone Arnold Savage, but Otto de Grandison, and my cousin Thomas de Cobham, to say

nought of Sir Vere Fain, whom we did see a few months back, all and each eager to lay their lives at thy feet. If thou wilt not choose for thyself, what marvel that the Lady Cobham deemeth it her duty to make selection for thee?"

"I care not for any among them, and I have nought of choice, save that Arnold Savage misliketh me the worst of the four," said Gytha.

"Care not for any! 'Tis of that which I do complain. Lived there ever fair damsel of gentle birth, since days of chivalry first began, who did hold herself aloof as thou dost, be knights or squires what they may?"

"'Tis truth! They be all alike unto me. Alfgar excelleth them, one and all, in merit and in chivalry."

"Alfgar! Oh, soothly, yea," exclaimed Margaret inadvertently. "Thou canst not look to find *his* equal."

And then she stopped, and her brunette cheek grew crimson at Gytha's smile.

"I would Alfgar might have heard thee! Mayhap I look to find it not, Margaret; but short of that I cannot be content."

"Forsooth, and thou wilt even be mal-content for the remainder of thy life, if that be so," said Margaret gaily. "I wis well thy partial sister's eyes do see nought of fault in Alfgar, and do ever compare other folks with him to their most grievous disparagement. But see; they do all come trooping hither from the hall, and Lord Cobham riseth to speak. What saith he? O Gytha, 'tis the Gospels he hath asked for, and Sir John Beverley will even read. Of a surety Reginald will go. Ay, see, he riseth—but nay—Eleanor Culpepper demandeth that he do remain. Canst observe her face? He loveth not to stay, Gytha; but he will do her bidding, albeit he crosseth himself, and will not hearken. O Gytha, 'tis well for thee that thou and thy brother be of one mind on these matters."

CHAPTER IX.

FAILURE.

MARGARET's eager voice lowered instinctively in accordance with the growing silence, and broke off abruptly as she found herself almost the only speaker. Sir John Oldcastle came a step forward.

"There be many here to-night who belong not unto mine own proper household," he said. "I do advise all such that they be at full liberty to retire, if so they will, without breach of courtesy. My reverend friend, Sir John Beverley, will even now read unto us a portion of the Holy Gospel, and will speak unto us such words as I do trust may be given unto him of God to utter for our edification. They who desire not to listen need not to remain, but shall be conducted unto their chambers; albeit I would beseech all who have a care for their souls, not hastily to flee from that which may be a profit unto them."

One or two near the door slipped out quietly. Sir Reginald Cobham's squires looked to see what their chief would do; and Sir Reginald glanced at Eleanor Culpepper, trusting his fair tyrant would relent. But she showed no signs of yielding, and he remained where he was, though evidently finding his position one of considerable embarrassment to himself.

The heavy manuscript Bible, with its purple velvet binding and golden clasps, was brought in and laid on the bench beside Sir John Beverley, there being no fixed table in the room. They sang a hymn together first—a simple Lollard song of praise. Gytha's rich voice took the lead, and rang high above all the others, while the usual quiet of her expression gave place to a burning flush and quivering light of joy. Reginald Cobham looked wonderingly at her once or twice, as he stood silently listening. What was there in those plain unpolished utterances which could thus affect her and break through her calm? But he was touched himself as the singing went on, and the fervent enthusiasm of the singers seemed to deepen. It was something very different from the measured Latin chanting to which he was accustomed. Was it this sort of thing which nerved these Lollards to do and dare even unto death? Almost a shudder crept over his stalwart knightly figure as the thought crossed his mind.

Death! and what a death! Could such horrors ever come to that fair girl standing opposite? or to the noble knight, Lord Cobham, whose deep tones helped to swell the solemn chorus? or to his own bright sister Margaret, whose downcast face showed something which in other days he had not been wont to see there? Was she too catching the infection of this terrible Lollardism? His brow contracted suddenly at the thought, and he glanced again towards Gytha and towards Lord Cobham. Verily they two, and many others in that household, were passing through life with a threatening sword pointed ever at their hearts.

But the hymn was over, and the book was opened, and Sir John Beverley—once a priest of the Church of Rome, but now an avowed Lollard, unbefriended for conscience'

sake—began to read. He chose the twenty-second of St. Luke, and went through it from first to last, making many comments by the way. It was a long chapter, but not too long for the thirsty souls, whose opportunities of drinking in truth from the pure Word of God were in those days so few and far between. It was not too long even for Sir Reginald Cobham, so far as interest was concerned. At first he had resolved not to listen, but finding abstraction of mind a simple impossibility, he decided that for Margaret's sake it was advisable that he should become acquainted with the errors of these Lollards. A little subsequent penance, or an extra gift at the shrine of Thomas à Becket, whither he was now journeying, would set the matter right as regarded his own conscience and his priestly confessor.

They all sat and listened silently and reverently—these ladies and knights and squires in the castle withdrawing-room—as Sir John Beverley read on, in his firm emphatic tones. They heard of that last sad wondrous evening in our Saviour's life on earth ; of the passover supper ; of the giving of bread and wine ; of the strife among the apostles as to which should be greatest ; of the warning to Peter ; of the going out through the evening darkness to the mount of Olives ; of the deep mysterious agony in the garden ; of the betrayal ; of Peter's denial. And at this part Sir John's voice grew deeper, and the faces around grew more intent. It was a matter which bore closely upon themselves.

“ Sothli thei takinge him ledden to the hous of the prince of prestis ; Petre forsothe suede him a fer. Sothli a fyre kyndlid in the myddel greet hous, and hem sittinge aboute, Petre was in the myddel of hem. Whom whanne sum handmayde hadde seyn sittinge at the light, and hadde biholde him, she seide : And this was with him.

And he denye代 him, seyinge : Womman I knowe him not. And aftir a litil a nothir man seyngē him, seide, And thou ert of him. Petre forsothe, seide, A ! man I am not. And a space maad as of oon our, sothli another affermyde, seyngē : Treuli, and this was with him; forwhi and he is of Galilee. And Petre saide, Man I wot not what thou seist. And a non yit him spekinge, a cok crew. And the Lord turned aghen, biheeld Petre ; and Petre hadde mynde of the word of Jhesu, as he hadde said: For bifore that the koc crew, thries thou shalt denye me. And Petre gon forth, wepte bitterly."

"He wept bitterly," repeated Sir John Beverley. "Forsooth, and he had verily need thus to weep, after that he had sore grieved his Master's heart, by denying of His Name before men. Let us beware that we do take this lesson unto our own hearts. There be many in these days who, through Peter's craven fear, do act even like as Peter did.

"Tis a matter, my brethren, which we do all well to consider. These be troublous times, and I see not that they be like to become less troublous. Full many rocks do lie ahead, on the which one and another of us may speedily come to shipwreck. But if so it be nought beyond shipwreck of the poor body, and the soul be safe for aye in Christ His arms of mercy, fear not, neither dread ye in your hearts. There be, that do slay the body, but after that can do no more beyond. Fear ye not them, else, in your craven dread, ye may even fall as Peter fell.

"I wis well that 'tis no easy matter in this realm, and in these days, to stand boldly forth for our Lord Christ. There be many timorous disciples who do put their lantern under a bushel, and in no wise on a candlestick, by the which it should give light unto all that be in the house. Their light shineth not before men in such wise,

as that men seeing its brightness be fain to glorify our Father that is in heaven.

“ I ne deem not that St. Paul, neither St. John, neither St. Peter himself in after days, would have been content so to hide each man his lantern, and to labour for his Master but in secret.

“ Ye will tell me there lieth danger in too open speech. So be it, my brethren ; nethelless give not the enemy place, and hold not back your utterance for Christ. Be think ye how He did stand firmly forth for ye, and quailed not before the fiercest wrath which Satan's followers might hurl against Him.

“ I have read to ye this even of that His great agony in the garden, when He did beseech lowly upon His knees : ‘ Fadir, if Thou wolt, turn ouer this cuppe fro me ; nethelos not my wille be done, but Thine.’ And likewise how ‘ He maad in agonye preiede lengere ; and His swoot was maad as dropis of blood rennyng doun in to the erthe.’ No light nor common woe was this sore agony of Christ. Yet we bethink us little of how He did mightily stand forth and endure for us, while we—like unto Peter—do endure and stand forth both feebly and faintly for him.

“ ‘ What slepen ye? Ryse ye, and preie ye, that ye enter not in to temptacioun !’ These be our Lord’s words. I do say them now unto each one of ye here present. ‘ Ryse ye, and preie ye !’ Temptation lieth ahead—how near or how bitter I may not tell thee. But rise ye and pray ye, that if it need be that ye do enter into temptation, ye may be each and all preserved from Peter’s grievous fall.”

And then Sir John Beverley prayed fervently, earnestly, as of a man who felt that his own time might be short, and that he needed to make the most of what remained

to him. He prayed for himself and for all about him ; for his host and all the household ; for those who were followers of Christ, and for those who were not ; for the king and for the realm ; for Lollards and for Roman Catholics. He prayed long as well as earnestly ; but when the evening devotions were over there were few who showed signs of weariness.

The party broke up immediately afterwards, the greater number retiring at once to bed. Margaret cast one anxious glance at her brother's face, and then beat a hurried retreat, in dread of any conversation with him upon the past scene. He made no remarks, however, and if he looked grave, she could detect no absolute annoyance in his expression.

Nor did he bring up the subject with Margaret during the next three days of his stay at the castle. Each evening was a repetition of the first, as regarded singing, reading, and exposition. Sir Reginald remained present every time, listening quietly and even attentively, but expressing no opinions whatever on his own part. Margaret was a good deal perplexed at this unwonted reserve.

The last day of Sir Reginald's stay had arrived, and about an hour before supper Margaret was gathering some flowers in the garden, whither she had been sent by Lady Cobham. Half-unconsciously she was humming a tune to herself, while musing over the last few days, and believing herself to be quite alone. A slight movement near suddenly arrested her attention, and she glanced up to see her brother standing by her side, in his long fur-lined mantle.

"Reginald !" she exclaimed involuntarily.

"Art thou in haste to return ?" he asked.

Margaret wished she could have answered in the affirmative. "I may not remain over long," she said, after

a moment's pause. "Hast left Eleanor unto herself, Reginald?"

"I wot not where she may be; and I have need, forsooth, of a few words with *thee*, Margaret."

It was coming now. Margaret drew one quick breath, but only said—"Ye will start by early morn on the morrow."

"Needs be, if we would reach Canterbury ere night-fall. Thou wilt perchance see us again ere long as we pass hitherward towards mine home. But I know not. Men say we be scarce like to see peaceful days, and there be divers br uitings of war. I would fain and gladly carry my banner into France."

"I will not give thee messages nor letters unto my mother, until I do see thee again," said Margaret. And then as she saw him thoughtfully preparing to bring out some question, which was evidently in his mind, she added—"How lik'st thou our fair Gytha?"

"Truly, after Eleanor, never saw I fairer dame," said Sir Reginald, with very simple-hearted loyalty.

"Eleanor—oh ay," said Margaret half-impatiently. "Thou hast needs put her first. But Gytha—Gytha is more unto me than sister."

"Thy dear and chosen friend is a Lollard, Margaret."

She had helped him to plunge into the subject which she was most anxious to avoid, but her presence of mind did not forsake her. "Truly we be one and all in a Lollard household," she said readily—"Eleanor Cul-pepper none less than Gytha."

Reginald bent his eyes upon her steadily. "Think'st thou Eleanor hath aught of inclination towards Lollardy?"

"What wis I? She would not let thee depart from the evening reading."

"Thou know'st that doth signify nought. She might

not herself be absent, and desired that I would not quit her side. Think'st thou she hath verily aught of Lollard inclinations, Margaret?"

"Nay, truly I deem it not," said Margaret. "Eleanor careth little for such matters, in comparison of love and hunting, cotes, mantles, hoods, and wimples."

"'Tis as so it should be for a fair dame," said Reginald jealously. "I love not that women be clerks, neither setting up of their private judgments in Church matters."

"So thou art content, all is well," said Margaret, with a touch of satire.

"It needeth not that thou and I do come to sharp words on this matter," said Reginald quietly. "Thou lovest not Eleanor over well, I ween, and 'tis a trouble unto me; but thou art free to like or to mislike whom thou wilt. 'Tis another matter of which I would now speak unto thee. Eleanor is safe of Lollardy. I fear not for her. But how about thee?"

"I did not think to grieve thee, Reginald. I will even restrain my tongue and mine inclinations, and strive to take Eleanor unto mine heart, if so it pleaseth thee."

"Nay, nay!" said Reginald, half-laughing; "thou art not wont to be thus supple. And love which is enforced becometh that which is not love at all. Thou hast not answered mine question, gentle sister."

"What think'st thou of Lollardy in thine heart, Reginald, sith thou hast seen it in this household?" She asked the question to gain time; not that she hoped to escape answering. But she could not make up her mind what line to adopt. She was wavering and hesitating.

"'Tis more to the purpose that I do ask thee—what think'st thou?—meseemeth."

"If thou wilt not answer to my questioning, then neither will I answer to thine," responded Margaret.

"I do verily deem that Lollardy hath its temptations," said Reginald steadily. "They be words of wondrous beauty which Sir John Beverley hath read unto us each even. But thou wottest well that Scripture be forbidden by holy Church to be read of the commonalty. I will have to do much penance for that I myself have been a listener. But I did desire to know somewhat more of what this Lollardy might be. And I will not have thee to be a Lollard!"

The last words were uttered firmly. Margaret's dark eyes were lifted to his with one momentary glance of rebellion. The next instant they sank again in a hidden tremor of fear. She guessed what all this portended.

"I will not have thee to be a Lollard, Margaret."

The words came a second time, resolute, though kind. Margaret stood with downcast eyes.

"Dost thou verily deem, Reginald, that those wondrous words of Holy Writ were given of God unto man, but for that man should *not* read them?"

"But for that the priests should read and study them, and pass on unto us such portions as be suited for our condition."

"I do marvel greatly how much the worthy priests of this country do study God's word; or how much they do give of the same unto the common folks."

"Mayhap they be not all faithful unto their trust," said Reginald, who had inveighed too often against the flagrant vices of priests and friars, to be able now to say much in their favour. "Nethelless that hath nought to do with the question."

"Save that if pots and pitchers be empty, it meseemeth 'tis best to go drink at the clear spring of water itself," said Margaret with quickness.

Sir Reginald's brows drew together.

"Margaret, 'twas thy mother's desire that I should question thee on this matter. I fear me I will hardly take back the reply she would fain have."

"And if thou dost not—"

Margaret looked questioningly. She wanted to find out how much was involved in her answer—the answer which she knew she must give, put off the evil moment as she might.

"Thy mother will not have thee to be a Lollard, Margaret."

The same words again—as if he had been well accustomed to the use of them.

"Thou hast not told me what I asked of thee," she said slowly.

"Verily I deem that for thy soul's good and for thy temporal advantage, she would even chance the displeasure of our fair cousin, Lady Cobham, and remove thee hence."

Margaret's brown cheek grew white, and her breath came hard and short.

"Thou didst ask me, and I have now answered thee," said Sir Reginald, after a pause. "I have asked thee, and thou hast not answered me."

"What didst ask?" faltered Margaret.

She was carefully—too carefully—counting the cost of confession. *Could* she, indeed, for Christ's sake, give up all?

"Thou canst scarce have forgotten. Art thou a Lollard, Margaret?"

She had gained nothing by her delay. The question was now in plainer terms than before.

"What deem'st thou to be a Lollard?" she inquired.
"I would fain know, ere I do speak."

"Thou wottest well. I care not for to go into the

question with thee. I ask but a brief reply. Art thou a Lollard, Margaret?"

He was growing displeased at her delay, and she could see he would endure no more. Perfectly still they both stood for a moment—she gazing upon the ground, he gazing upon her. No sound of the singing birds around reached Margaret's ears. One moment's fierce battle she fought with self; but in that instant of dire temptation, instead of looking up to her Lord for help, she was weighing the worth of what she might lose. She lifted her eyes to her brother's face, and answered—

"Nay!"

"Thou art not?"

"I have answered thee."

"Nor like to become one?"

"Nay."

"Nor hast desire to cast in thy lot with them?"

"I see not that thou hast aught to do with my desires," said Margaret sharply. "I have answered thee plainly, Reginald. What need'st thou more?"

Whether or not he were fully satisfied, he probably saw that there would be no great wisdom in pressing the matter further. He said a few kind words, not one of which she heard, and then moved away.

Margaret went on gathering flowers till he was out of sight. Then she was alone. She dropped the flowers at her feet, and looked round her with a wild half-terrified glance. What had she said? What had she done?

"And thou art of them?"

"A! man, I am not!"

The question and answer came to her with as vivid clearness as if uttered aloud by a human voice. And then, as if in echo—

"Art thou a Lollard, Margaret?"

" Nay."

A deep low sobbing sigh escaped her lips. She wrung her hands together, and pressed them over her chest.

" 'Tis done now. I have said the words. And well I wis I would say them yet again, did the trial come again? O God ! O Christ ! forgive me !" and she wept aloud in agony. " I cannot leave mine home and all I love ! O Christ, I have denied Thy Name, and I cannot—dare not—take back my words. Ah, me ; I wot there can be no forgiveness thus !"

And then she gathered up the fallen flowers and walked back to the castle. But Gytha wondered at her strange forced merriment at supper-time, and still more at the look of anguish which came and settled on her face throughout the singing and reading of that night.

CHAPTER X.

A T V A R I A N C E.

ONE bright summer day Gytha Cheyne was busily employed in the operation of combing wool, in the large spinning-room of Coulyng Castle. Margaret Cobham and Eleanor Savage might have been seen by her side, busied in a similar manner; while several other young ladies were occupied with the distaff or the shuttle. Lady Cobham had been standing for a considerable time before the loom, not for any mere lady-like pretence, but for real hard work. She now gave up her post to Eleanor Culpepper, and retired to her own chamber. The adage of the cats and mice was at least as true, four or five hundred years ago, as it is now; and her absence was followed by an immediate relaxation of fingers and tongues. Gytha was, perhaps, the only one who showed no change whatever in gravity or in assiduity.

“Hast heard, Margaret, that if the morrow be fair, her ladyship will even grant us leave to go a-hunting?” asked Eleanor Savage.

“Nay—I wist it not,” Margaret answered listlessly.

“Thou hast ever loved the chase. How carest thou not this summer?”

Eleanor looked curiously as she spoke; but receiving no answer, she glanced towards the perch in the corner

of the room, where a row of hooded merlins sat, patient and motionless, waiting till their mistresses were free to bestow attention upon them again.

"I see not Maid Marguerite yonder, Gytha?"

"Thou mayst know her by the green jesses which do hang below," responded Gytha, never pausing in her work.

"Who gave thee yon jesses?"

"Her ladyship—yestere'en."

"Tis well Joan be not here. To hear that her ladyship hath bestowed a favour upon thee maketh Joan's countenance ever to lower, like unto a thunder-cloud, for the day after."

"Where will ye go for the hunting on the morrow?" asked Gytha.

"Down the river-banks. The dogs be all in good condition for rousing of the game. 'Tis over soon for quails; but methinks we will find somewhat to reward our efforts—albeit but a sparrow."

"Gytha would as fain as no that ye found none," said Margaret.

Gytha laughed—as pleading guilty to the accusation.

"Truly, Margaret, 'tis much vain and profitless toil, unto my mind; and I love not to see the bonny birds die—ay, not even when mine own beauteous Maid Marguerite doth strike. Methinks this world hath enough of death and sadness, and needeth not that we do make a sport of that same."

"Thou hast nought in thee of the spirit of the chase," said Eleanor impatiently. "And methinks thine example hath infected Margaret likewise. Of old, unless she were spinning or working, might she never be seen lacking her hawk upon her wrist; but now, like unto thee, she taketh small pains with the training of her merlin."

"'Tis no doing of mine, Eleanor," replied Gytha. "I

care not mine own self to be ever fondling of pets, neither hawks, neither dogs ; but Margaret witteth well that I have never striven to infect her with mine over-clerkly tastes. I would, forsooth, be loth to take away so harmless a pleasure."

"Thou deemest it verily harmless?" asked Eleanor half-sarcastically.

"Wherefore nay?"

"As thou didst even now tell us—to be making sport of sadness and death!"

"Mayhap my words were over strict. 'Tis needful that the birds be killed for the table, and they be given unto man for that purpose. Neither did I mean for to condemn the pastime *as* a pastime—for them to whom it soothly *is* a pastime. To me is it none such."

"Neither to Margaret, meseemeth—if it be her purpose to go a-hunting game, with the self-same sober face which she hath worn of late."

"Thou mayst e'en leave my face to take heed unto itself," said Margaret. "I love not to be ever remarked upon in such wise."

Eleanor exchanged a quizzical glance with a *chambrière* near, but did not press the point; and at that moment Joan appeared in the doorway.

"Gytha Cheyne, my lady-mother desireth converse with thee."

"Wilt thou take my place, Joan?" asked Gytha, her gentle dignity contrasting with the other's ungentle *brusquerie*.

No answer being vouchsafed, she did not ask the question a second time, but passed quietly out of the room and into the next chamber.

Dame Cobham was seated thoughtfully in the chair, dressed in a summer gown of rich green silk ; having a

flowing mantle over it, embroidered with gold, and faced though not lined with fur, and a lofty horned head-dress. She looked up with a smile as Gytha entered.

"Thou art there, fair child; nay, come hither, and sit thee beside me. I have somewhat to say, which I would fain say unto thee alone."

"I am ready, madame," said Gytha, though showing no particular alacrity.

"Hast a guess what are the words which I would utter?"

"Concerning my Lord Cobham?" asked Gytha composedly.

The smile on Lady Cobham's face faded. "Ah, Gytha! nay—had that been the subject of my desired converse, I had not begun thus lightly."

"Wherefore not, madame?"

"Thou knowest, no less than I, how these men be, step by step, a-working for to entangle him in their meshes. Ay, and they will even do it too. Oh, my lord John—mine own lord—"

She hid her face, and sobbed for a minute.

"Hast thou none trust in the kindness and affection of the king, madame?" inquired Gytha.

"I know not. I know not. Hast thou?"

"I do put my trust higher than in earthly king or earthly friend," said Gytha steadily. "Nethless, it seemeth that albeit princely love and friendship may be little worth, yet so far as it hath ever worth at all, we may even hope and trust at this present. I do firmly believe King Harry will strive his utmost for our dear lord, Sir John."

"His utmost! Mayhap! Child, thou little deemest the power of these prelates, when they do set their hearts to gain any matter. And verily I do believe that of set

purpose it is determined of them that my lord shall recant his errors or shall die."

"My lord will not recant," said Gytha. "Callest thou them his *errors*, gentle dame?"

"They be surely, surely errors, which can cause a good man's death?" said Lady Cobham mournfully.

"Nay, rather the errors be surely on the side of them who would fain put a good man to death, madame, for nought but reading and causing to be preached of God's pure Gospel."

"I would I had thy courage, gentle one," said Dame Cobham. "But these be no days for turning unto Lollardy. And now thou hast led me away from what I had in mine heart to say unto thee. Wilt hear it now?"

"When it pleases thee, madame," Gytha answered, with the same want of alacrity which she had before shown.

Lady Cobham had put aside her subject of anxiety for the present, and was sitting upright and smiling. "Gytha, knowest thou that 'tis time to bethink us of thy settlement in life?"

"Nay, madame, I prythee; I am yet but young," said Gytha earnestly. "Margaret is mine elder."

"For Margaret also I have thoughts. Canst deem what they be?"

"Perchance thou and Alfgar do have thoughts alike here, madame?"

"Thou hast guessed aright. But there be certain hindrances in this matter. Chiefest of all is Alfgar's most unhappy Lollardy, whereas Margaret and her family be all Catholics."

Gytha checked herself, when about to demur as to the word being rightly applied to Margaret.

"Also Alfgar himself hath to carve him a name and fame. He hath not the broad lands and ample gold of—"

Lady Cobham paused. "Wittest thou of whom I do speak?"

"Of Lord Cobham?"

"Didst verily think it, Gytha?"

Gytha hesitated an instant, and then simply answered, "Nay."

"Tell unto me the right name."

"Madame, if the name be as I do fear—I would even tell thee that it may never be."

"What name?—and what may never be?"

"Arnold Savage," faltered Gytha.

"He will wed thee, Gytha."

Gytha's lips were compressed for an instant. "Madame, 'tis matter of consent on the two sides, and not on the one only."

"Consent!" Lady Cobham laughed slightly at the bare idea of consent being refused in opposition to her will.
"Thou wilt wed him, Gytha."

"It can never be," repeated Gytha.

"Know'st thou not that he loveth thee with constant devotion—hath loved thee from the moment he first beheld thee?"

"I care not. 'Tis a love all of one side. Madame, I beseech thee, hear! I cannot wed Arnold Savage."

"Can'st not! But 'tis my will that thou should'st wed him, and that speedily."

"Nay, madame."

Gytha's whitening lips could scarcely frame the words. She knew how completely she was in the baroness' power in this matter.

"Thou sayest, 'nay.' But I say, 'ay.'"

Lady Cobham's caressing hand was withdrawn, and her dark eyes had a gleam of displeasure in them.

"I am not wont to be thus opposed in mine own

household. Gytha, thou wilt verily wed Arnold Savage. I desire of thee ready obedience to this my will, or thou wilt never be unto me again that which thou hast been."

"Madame, I *cannot*," murmured Gytha, with despairing firmness. "Didst thou but know how I do mislike and contemn him—" She paused a moment there. "Nay, I would not say I do contemn any man, for soothly 'tis no rightful spirit to be of; but I do less revere no living man."

"Thou art but a child, and know'st not thine own inclinations. Dost dream thou preferrest Thomas Cobham, or other of thine admirers?"

"Verily, madame, they be all alike unto me, save that Arnold Savage pleaseth me the least."

"Thou art of somewhat perverse spirit. I will have mine own will in this matter, Gytha."

She touched her hand to the girl's colourless cheek. " 'Tis that I love thee, and desire to see thee rightly settled in life. Arnold Savage, as thou wittest well, is of Lollard inclinations."

"He!" repeated Gytha. "Madame, he careth for nought in life but making of love and finding of pastimes."

"Thou art unjust. He would turn him from Catholic to Lollard twice twenty times, twice told, for the winning of a smile from thee."

"Ay; and turn him back from Lollard to Catholic as speedily and as oft, for the avoidance of a frown from priest or monk," said Gytha. " 'Tis of no such stuff that faithful Lollards be made."

"Thou art no true dame of noble chivalry, else would'st thou better prize the heart's devotion of one who would die for thee."

"Madame—madame—thou knowest him not," said Gytha impetuously. " *Thou* hast not rightly guaged his

shallow worth. He hath showed himself other to thee than to the world around. Thou speakest of thy love to me, and truly I have cause to put faith in thy love; but I would take as dearer pledge of the same that thou should'st deliver me for Lollardy into the hands of Master Arundel, than that thou should'st deliver me for this purpose into the hands of Arnold Savage."

"I looked not for to hear such words from thee, Gytha."

"Madame, I have ever striven to be dutiful and faithful unto thee, but thou askest that of me now which lieth beyond my power. I cannot yield mine heart unto Arnold Savage."

"Thou wilt yield thine hand, an thou wilt not yield thine heart," said Lady Cobham coldly. "I have spoken of the matter to my lord, Gytha, and—if nought miscarry—we do purpose that thy wedding shall come to pass in the autumn of this year. Will *this* comfort thee, silly child? Thou shalt not wed a squire, but a knight. Sir John hath promised to bring about that change for thee, so soon as may be."

Gytha felt as if her last hope were being cut away from beneath her feet. Did Sir John Oldcastle indeed desire this union? She had been bracing herself up with the thoughts of an appeal to him. It was her only resource remaining. Alfgar might pity and sympathise, but he could not aid. She had not the dimmest expectation that her parents would interfere.

And just at this moment, as the thought of her brother crossed her mind, there came a waiting-maiden to the door, with the words—

"Master Cheyne hath even now arrived from London, and seeketh converse with madame. Will madame see him without delay, or wait till he hath changed his habit?"

"He hath brought tidings of my lord. O Gytha—

think'st thou they be evil tidings? Mine heart beateth—fluttereth—that I scarce can speak. Gytha—thine arm—” and Lady Cobham leant against her breathlessly. “ Bring him unto me with all speed. Delay not for aught. Haste, maiden, haste thee! Gytha, what think'st thou he hath come for to tell me?”

“ Madame, I know not how I can let thee to wete of that which I wot not mine own self.”

“ Thou wilt not give me comfort. ‘Tis cruel of thee, Gytha. Ah! thou know'st not what it is, such love as mine to him, else would'st thou not speak thus calmly. But hearken—thy brother cometh. Set open the door speedily, Gytha, and call him to enter.”

Gytha obeyed, and brought in Alfgar, booted, spurred, and armed, and in much the same mud-bespattered condition as that which so displeased Queen Elizabeth in her favourite Essex some hundred and fifty years later. Lady Cobham was less particular than Queen Elizabeth, and only asked eagerly—

“ What tidings of my lord?”

“ He is well in health, madame.”

“ In health! Hath aught of ill overtaken him?”

“ Nay, I do trust not,” said Alfgar soberly. “ No evil hath come unto him—as yet. I have letters from him to bring unto you, madame. Will ye that I do deliver them now?”

She held out her hand impatiently. “ How canst ask? Know'st not how I do greed but for a sight of his handwriting? Hast thou come but for to bring these unto me, Alfgar?”

He hesitated, and she looked up at him searchingly with her bright eyes.

“ Thou hast ridden hard and fast. What other purpose hast thou of his will?”

"Madame, I did verily ride hard and fast that I might arrive quickly, for I must depart again on the early morrow."

"To the city?"

"My lord hath even so desired, madame?"

"He would not thus desire thy presence, in such pressing wise, were all matters smooth and straight betwixt him and the king. Thou hast not yet told me all the object of thy return, and I do desire to be made acquaint with the same."

"Madame, my lord desireth that the castle be kept in a state of full and ready defence."

"He doth! And wherefore?"

"I asked him not. He said unto me no more, save a few directions for the carrying out of his will. I have but to obey, and seek not to wissen* his reasons."

"He scentheth danger, else had he given thee none such command. I will mine own self see unto this matter. But his writing unto me is long, and I do desire for to read it. Thou and Gytha may await my pleasure in yonder chamber. Ye will not mislike a while of quiet converse—the two of ye together."

* Know.

CHAPTER XI.

CHAMBERS AND PASSAGES.

IT was a small octagon-shaped tower-chamber, which Gytha and her brother had been directed to enter. Two or three rough benches were pretty nearly all the furniture it contained, and upon one of these they sat down, side by side. Gytha's look of oppressed and anxious gravity found a full reflection in Alfgar's fate, and it was without even a smile that the two pairs of grey eyes encountered.

"What tidings, Alfgar?" inquired his sister.

"Peril threatened unto our lord," Alfgar answered briefly. "'Tis not the first time I have spoken thus to thee. But the peril draweth nearer."

"What peril?" she asked.

"As I did once warn thee that thus it would be. 'Tis this gathering of prelates at St. Paul's who do work the evil. But I have little to avise thee of save that which cometh of rumour and of the changed regards of men. Soothly I do believe one thing which folks do say,—even that these said prelates will know no peace nor rest of heart, till they have gotten Sir John within their power, to work their will upon him."

"But the king, Alfgar—how of the king? The king of a surety will not forsake one whom he loveth like unto Sir John?"

"I know not how far the king's power may reach in this matter. He is ever kind, and sheweth a pleasant countenance unto my lord. Yet, methinks, less than of old. He hath communed with Lord Cobham oft of late, and after each communing he weareth a more sober aspect, and speaketh less unto my lord. I do note these matters well, Gytha, and wis not whither they may tend; but methinks my lord looketh for a speedy out-breaking of the storm upon him."

"And 'tis for that he doth desire that the castle be in a condition of ready defence, as said'st thou."

"Ay!" Alfgar paused, and drew his brows together thoughtfully. "'Tis certes a right and lawful proceeding, Gytha—think'st thou?—that my lord may use what of defence lieth within his power against them who would fain slay him."

"Methinks Master Wickliffe and Sir Roger Acton would have been even at variance in that self-same matter," said Gytha soberly.

"I like not overmuch Sir Roger Acton, albeit I do verily deem him a good man and a true Lollard," said Alfgar, lowering his tone and speaking gravely. "But I do fear he giveth misavising* unto my lord. Yet in this matter—so that there be nought of rebellious uprising against our rulers—verily, I see not that Sir John be bound for to walk meekly into the den of the lion, if so be he may keep himself out of the same."

"I think not Sir John would do aught of wrong in this matter," said Gytha, with placid feminine trust in her hero.

"And I also do put faith in his judgment sooner than in mine own—ne'theless that doubtings do once and anon trouble me. But I have nought to do save for to obey.

* Ill advice.

Gytha, our lady will summon us speedily. Speak unto me a word of Margaret."

"She lacketh nought in health," said Gytha slowly.

"Speaketh she ever my name?"

"Not as aforetime. I wis not what cloud hath shadowed her these past months, Alfgar. I do trace it back unto her brother's coming in the spring, but further can I say nought."

"Thou canst not seek unto the cause?"

"Nay; there am I even altogether in the dark. I have prayed her for to tell me, but she hath withdrawn from me her confidence—albeit not her love. It grieveth me sorely, Alfgar—nor me alone. Our lady hath striven in vain to reach to the meaning of this change. Margaret denieth not that she is in trouble, but what her heartsore may hap to be she letteth no man to wete of. I see not what we may do further, till it pleaseth her to speak."

Alfgar sighed heavily. "And thou deemest she hath changed towards me—though I scarce can bear to couple yon word with her name."

"She hath changed; yet I do rather deem the change to be in her own mind and spirit, than towards thee or others. Mayhap we will understand one day more clearly. At this present I know not what we may do, save to pray unto God for her, and in that, wot I well, thou wilt not be lacking."

"'Tis hard to await with due patience," said Alfgar, smiling rather sadly. "Harder, for that I know her to be in trouble, and I may not e'en do mine utmost to give comfort unto her. But tell me now of thyself. How farest thou? I could have deemed thee too to be grieved about somewhat, when I entered at the first."

Gytha flushed and paled suddenly. "'Twas a matter

of which my lady was avising me. Alfgar—'tis her will—that I—that Arnold Savage—that we do wed this autumn."

"Thou!—and Arnold!"

"'Tis her will."

"Hast thou aught of will in this matter?"

"As I did tell my dame—sooner would I she did deliver me unto Master Arundel for Lollardy."

"Thou know'st not perchance what thy strength might be. 'Tis no light thing, Gytha, to confront death in the flames."

"Mayhap I did speak hastily," she said in a low dejected tone. "But—O Alfgar—if thou canst aid me—I beseech thee—thou knowest soothly how I do sorely mislike Arnold."

"Verily do I! Thou hadst best bide thee awhile, Gytha. If opportunity offer I will speak unto Sir John for thee; but methinks thou wilt plead thine own cause best, when next thou seest him. Till that day, cheer thee up, sweet one, and look not for evil. These things will e'en come straight, I do trust, in good time. Hearken! my lady calleth."

Gytha hastened to obey the summons, and found Dame Cobham weeping over Sir John's long and closely written billet. She was sent to summon her brother again to the lady's presence; and a long cross-examination followed, respecting Lord Cobham's movements and condition and possible danger, which the tired and hungry young squire endured with exemplary patience. Between Sir John Oldcastle's injunctions that he should cause no unnecessary anxiety to Lady Cobham, and Lady Cobham's determination to know everything which it was in his power to tell, Alfgar had a somewhat difficult part to play. He played it well, however; answering cautiously, yet with

no appearance of hesitation ; speaking the precise truth, yet contriving to work round the lady to a more cheerful and hopeful frame of mind.

"And now thou lackest refreshment and art doubtless somewhat famished after thy hasty journey," said Lady Cobham, when that point was attained. "'Tis scarce an hour till supper ; but an thou canst not wait thus long, thou may'st go seek what thou wilt. Gytha's little fingers will doubtless help divest thee of thine harness."*

Rather a lengthy process was this said divestment, in some cases ; but Alfgar was quick and business-like in his motions, having been trained by one who permitted no dawdling. No long time elapsed before his mud bespattered travelling suit was laid aside, and he had made his appearance in attire better suited for castle wear amongst the ladies.

Gytha had had as much of quiet conversation with him as she was likely to obtain that evening. In the monotonous life of the castle-dwellers, the advent of their liege lord's favourite's squire was an event of no small magnitude ; and the suddenness of his appearance, and the uncertainty as to its cause, only added to the general interest respecting the same. Once out of his chamber, Alfgar was claimed as universal property, and found himself obliged to submit to a fire of questions from all sides. He took his position on one of the withdrawing-room benches, and politely gave himself up to his fair persecutors, who, having been released from loom and spinning-wheel, had appeared in strong force for the occasion. The only face he did not see among them was the only one he wanted.

"Have ye aught more, forsooth, that ye desire to

* Armour.

question me, fair damoiselles?" he asked, smiling a little, when the first break occurred.

"Thou may'st well ask," said Eleanor Savage. "Me-thinks an thou didst answer more readily, we would have ended ere now all we did need for to know."

"What would'st thou more, Madame Eleanor? I have told thee whatsoever thou hast sought to kennēn."

"Nay; for we have been all pressing to learn of thee what might be the true reason of thy coming hither this day."

"For the bringing of letters unto my lady from my lord."

"That and that alone?" asked Eleanor inquisitively.

"That said I not. An my lord hath committed unto me a small matter or two, which do require aught of attention, thou wittest the loyal duty of a true esquire, which is that he do restrain his tongue from prating of that which his lord hath not desired him to spread abroad."

"Saw I ever an esquire who did thus love to try the patience of a dame, under guise of loyal duty?" exclaimed Eleanor. "What think'st thou of thy brother, Gytha?"

"An he could not hold his counsel, I would deem more lightly of him," said Gytha quietly.

"Gytha Cheyne," spoke up Joan suddenly, "for what wert thou thus long closeted with my lady-mother, before that Alfgar did arrive?"

The conscious colour flushed into Gytha's cheek, but she only answered steadily—"For that it was her desire, Joan."

"Thou and Alfgar do love to deal in mysteries to-day, meseemeth," said Joan somewhat tartly. "'Tis of little avail in this matter. I do deem myself in small peril of being under error, when I put question whether my mother had aught to say unto thee concerning Arnold Savage?"

Gytha made no answer whatever, and Eleanor turned round to look curiously at her downcast face. It was another voice, however which said quietly—

“Joan, thou seggist* of that with which thou hast no concernment. If I do will to make complaint unto my cousin, the Lady Joan, thou wittest well what shall result unto thee.”

Alfgar had started up impetuously at the first word, for it was Margaret Cobham herself who had appeared suddenly in their midst. She was dressed in the same rich style as of old, but with a darker choice of colour than she had once been wont to display. The greatest change, however, was in her face. There was no look of actual illness about her, and she was neither thinner nor paler than of old ; but it seemed as if all the sparkle and brightness had died completely out of her countenance, and its own peculiar mobility had been exchanged for a strange heavy calm. Alfgar’s eager though half-hesitating greeting, was received impassively ; and then she sat down on Lady Cobham’s chair, while a sort of chilled silence fell on all present.

“Gytha telleth me thou hast been well in health of late, Margaret,” said Alfgar.

“There is nought that aileth me, I thank thee.” And then, as if conscious of the ungraciousness of her own words, she added, with a dim sort of smile, “But we did not look for to see thee to-day, Alfgar. What may be thy call hitherward ?”

He had to go over the old ground again, nowise reluctant to do it for her sake. She listened steadily, but now and then with the look of one who did not quite grasp all he was saying. The clang of the supper-horns

* Speakest.

broke in upon the conference, and the long ceremonious meal followed. Afterwards, during the general break-up of the party and retirement to bed, Alfgar managed to encounter Margaret in a lonely passage, and seizing on the opportunity, said submissively,—

“Thou hast not yet forgiven me?”

“For what?” Margaret asked. “I understand thee not.”

“That can I not explain. Of a surety I have in some manner displeased thee in the past, little wotting how.”

“Thou hast not. I am in no wise displeased with thee,” said Margaret, turning away her face.

“And yet thou canst look upon me, as upon one for whom thou ne carest not for to see?”

“Nay; ‘tis not—‘tis not so,” began Margaret faintly.

“Wilt thou let me don thy colours?” asked Alfgar suddenly, as a sort of test.

Margaret shook her head silently.

“Bethink thee, Margaret—an thou yet carest for one who hath long been faithful unto thee. On the morrow I go back to my lord’s side—and to peril. Mayhap thou wilt never see me more.”

“Thou!” repeated Margaret hurriedly. “Oh, nay; thou seekest but to fright me! What peril can be to *thee?*”

“If the oak do fall, it draggeth with it the surrounding ivy,” said Alfgar quietly. “We know not, day by day, what the next step may be, nor whither it may lead us. I would fain have one kind word from thee, Margaret, to carry with me.”

She turned suddenly to him eyes which were brimming with tears.

“Alfgar, thou art a Lollard?”

“Unto death!”

“Hast thou aught to do with a Catholic?”

"Thou art no Catholic, Margaret."

She came a step nearer, clasping her hands together passionately.

"I will even tell thee the truth. When Reginald was here he inquired of me concerning this matter. 'Twas question whether my mother would permit me to dwell longer here, or nay. I did avow myself a Catholic, and did promise him that he need have no thought nor fear of my taking up with Lollardy. What sayest thou to that, Alfgar?"

A moment's dead silence answered.

"Margaret, didst thou speak the truth unto thy brother?"

Margaret herself started at the changed tone of his voice.

"I did not," she answered steadily. "Think'st thou that maketh matters one whit the better? Nay, thou need'st not speak, nor strive to frame thy lips to courteous words as beseemeth a squire of chivalry. Look thou upon the bare verity. I have avowed myself a Catholic. I have denied the Name of thy Lord, and mine—ay, and through long months have persisted in the same dread lie. And if I do retract, and do openly join thy party, then do I break my word unto my brother, and behold—another lie! See'st thou, Alfgar? Nought hast thou now to say unto me. I bid thee good-night."

With drooping head she turned away and passed along the passage; but after one moment of bewildered thought, Alfgar sprang forward and was at her side.

"Margaret, thou mistakest! Margaret, I have much I fain would say unto thee."

"Thou may'st say thy say, but speedily, for it waxeth late."

She paused as she spoke; but words seemed to fail Alfgar.

"Thou knowest—thou knowest," he faltered. "O Margaret, I would fain speak unto thee of forgiveness; but of a surety thou knowest—soothly it needeth not—"

"Forgiveness, mayhap, if I do repent and retract," said Margaret, with a strange expression on her face.

"And thou dost—thou wilt—thou canst not persist in this."

"I do repent. If I do retract, then thou and all whom I love will see me never more again on earth."

She spoke clearly; but the next moment she had both hands over her face, and tears streaming through her fingers.

"Alfgar, thou knowest not—thou—the sore and bitter pain I have to undergo; but methinks there is One who wotteth—ay, and who pitith me, even while He hideth His face. Mayhap He will ere long give unto me strength for to confess His Name. If it be so, then farewell to thee for ever in this life. If it be not so, then farewell likewise; for while I be a falsely avowed Catholic, and thou a faithful Lollard, thou shalt never stain thy soul by close intercourse with me."

She held out her hand for one instant, and he pressed it to his lips with deeper and more fervent feeling than was often shown in so common-place and every-day an action.

"Thou wilt say nought to Gytha of that which I have told thee," said Margaret more calmly. "Mayhap I will myself speak unto her one day, ere long, but as yet I wis not. Good-night to thee, Alfgar. I may not longer delay."

And before he could speak she was gone. Alfgar stood long, like one bewildered, gazing through a little oilet at the clear starry August sky. Presently he retired

to the squires' chamber, but proved himself there a very unsociable and silent companion.

Had he indeed said farewell to Margaret, in any case? Was there no hope? He tried to close his eyes to the dark side, yet it came back to him continually.

Margaret was not visible next morning. He had no chance of exchanging another word with her. Gytha said she was indisposed and was keeping her chamber; but she looked perplexed, and added in a low tone to her brother—

“I marvel not, for methinks she hath wept the whole night through. Thou hast surely said nought which could grieve her, Alfgar?”

He shook his head.

“Seek only for to win her confidence. I charge thee with that till I do see thee again,” was his answer.

And then came dinner; and immediately afterwards Alfgar started for the city with his little band of men-at-arms. He had plenty of time for reflection that day—perhaps rather more than was good for him. A threatened attack from some highwaymen, who took heart on seeing the smallness of his party, had to be repelled; but nothing else occurred to break the monotony of the long ride. He grew indeed so absorbed in his own thoughts, that once or twice he very nearly came to grief over some natural obstruction or pitfall in the rugged road.

Danger or no danger, however, the journey was accomplished without accident, and late that day Alfgar was ushered into Lord Cobham's presence. He carried with him a letter from Lady Cobham, and various items of news from or concerning other members of the household.

“Hast told me all?” asked Sir John Oldcastle, when

he paused. "Thou bringest nought but good tidings unto me, and thou hast wisely and faithfully served thy mission. I desire not that the dames of my castle be rendered over-fearsome, yet would I have them in measure forewarned of that which may haply come upon them and upon us."

"And thou, my lord?" said Alfgar anxiously; "have all things gone smooth with thee also?"

"A servant of Christ looketh not for smoothness in this life," said Lord Cobham quietly. "The king desireth converse with me yet again upon the morrow."

"For to convert thee, my lord, unto his Church?"

"Doubtless for to make what effort he may. I would he might the rather be converted unto my religion."

"I would that his desire for thy welfare were somewhat less keen, my lord," said Alfgar rather sorrowfully.

"'Tis Master Arundel, not the king. But the message was somewhat peremptory in tone. Methinks the king's patience beginneth for to fail him at what he doth deem my wilful contumacy."

"Think'st thou he will take further steps—"

"'Twill be further step enough, if he do place the matter in Master Arundel's hands, as Master Arundel and his prelatical and priestly followers do right earnestly desire. He hath shielded me thus far, but I can scarce look for the shielding to continue greatly longer."

"And thou wittest soothly, my lord, that such be their aim?"

Lord Cobham laughed slightly.

"Verily, I wot somewhat more of these matters than is kenned* by the prelates. I have kept and do yet keep strict watch upon the face of events. It may hap that on any day—"

* Known.

Alfgar waited, but the sentence was not concluded.

"Forsooth, and it is well that my trust hath not an earthly king for its sole dependence," said Sir John Oldcastle presently. "The clouds may blacken, yet can they never shut out from mine heart the shining of the eternal Sun, which ever gloweth down upon me from heaven. Yet I would I had fewer of the weak and the gentle resting on mine arm, and sharing with me my trouble."

CHAPTER XII.

THE KING'S PRIVY CHAMBER.

"THOU wilt abide here for me, Alfgar, till it be the king's pleasure that I do come unto thee again," said Lord Cobham quietly, as he passed through the royal antechamber on the early afternoon of the following day.

After the ten o'clock dinner in the great hall of the palace, it was King Henry's custom, on certain days of the week, to spend there another hour or more, for the hearing of appeals and complaints from any who might choose to come to him. If he himself were obliged to be absent, the steward of the household took his place, surrounded by the knights of the household then in waiting. The hour was now, however, at an end, and the king having retired to his own apartment, Sir John Oldcastle was immediately conducted thither by John Butler, door-keeper to this same privy chamber of his Majesty.

King Henry was standing at the farther end of the room, when Lord Cobham entered, near to that lofty and gorgeous piece of furniture, the royal bed. He was dressed in a robe or gown of dark blue silk; the body fitting neatly to his graceful figure; the skirt falling in long rich folds to the ground, and extending almost to a train behind. The immense open sleeves, lined with ermine, despite the heat of the weather, reached to the full

length of the train. There was a facing of ermine round his throat, and a narrow band of green showing above it, which possibly belonged to some under garment, being visible also at the wrists. A broad gold belt confined his waist. He held himself erect with right royal dignity, and his handsome though youthful features wore an expression of thoughtful gravity. Two courtiers stood behind him : the one in a long robe of crimson, worked all over with huge gold circles ; the other in a short green gown and black hose and boots.

Sir John Oldcastle was received courteously, though with no relaxation of gravity.

"Thou hast come quickly, as I bade thee. 'Tis well so," the king said briefly. "I desire a while of converse alone with thee. My lords, I will summon ye again when I have need of ye."

The gentleman of the crimson gown beat a courtly retreat, followed by his companion. King Henry waited silently till the chamber-door was closed, and then sat down on the chair, motioning Lord Cobham to the heavy coffer at the foot of the bedstead.

"Sir John Oldcastle, hast thou given due thought unto those matters, concerning which we did converse together a while since ?"

"My liege lord, I have obeyed your command," said Sir John submissively.

"And thou art now convinced of thy grievous errors past ! Thou art willing to shrieve thee unto a priest, and seek that absolution for thy sins which the Church alone may bestow upon thee !"

"Nay, sire ; rather would I in all humbleness deem that I have already sought and already obtained that absolution which my Lord Christ, and He alone, hath power to give unto me."

"He giveth it through the Church," said the king.

"Sire, I pray your pardon ; but in my Gospels I find not that the Lord did bid men flee unto the Church, but that rather He did command them to flee unto Himself."

"Thou mistakest. Thou hast run grievously into error, I do greatly fear me. The Gospels are not for thee to read, Sir John—else shalt thou by thine own ignorance and darkness be sorely led astray—as indeed I do deem is even now the truth. 'Tis not too late for thee even yet to turn and to retrace thy wandering steps: Good now, Sir John, I, thy liege and sovereign lord, do earnestly beseech thee afresh to consider of this matter."

"I have verily and oft considered of the same," Sir John answered. "And I do even more and more come unto the same conclusion ; neither can I by any means swerve therefrom."

King Henry looked steadily at him for a minute.

"Sir John, knowest thou whereto this thy contumacy will lead thee ?"

"Sire, I can even conjecture the same."

"Hast thou no care nor thought for thyself—for thy welfare—for those whom thou lovest and cherishest ? Sir John, I do this day speak plain truth unto thee. There be they who have of long time desired for to have thy life in their power ; and I, in constant love to thee, have hitherto withheld my royal consent. But an thou dost obstinately continue in these thy deadly errors, thou leavest unto me small choice of action in the matter. Thou wottest well a ruler's duty before God : which is, that he do rightly maintain good order and sound doctrine in his realm."

"My lord king, I do scarce see how the reading and teaching of God's most holy Gospel tendeth to the sub-

version of order, neither to the spread of ill doctrine," said Sir John Oldcastle quietly.

"Thou knowest the laws of this realm, my lord John, and thou hast even broken the same," was the king's practical answer.

"Wherein have I transgressed against the laws, most noble prince?" asked Lord Cobham, cautious of committing himself unnecessarily.

"Dost need to ask? Thou knowest well the statute passed, early in the reign of the mighty prince, my father. That none in this our realm do presume to preach openly or privately, without the full consent of the diocesan of the place wherein he doth desire so to do. That none do dare to hold schools, neither to set up conventicles, nor to make any book, nor to preach nor to teach nor to instruct in any wise, for the furthering of doctrines which be opposed to the determinations of the Catholic Church. That none do ever show aught of favour nor countenance unto such preachers nor teachers, nor do help nor sustain them in any wise. Also, that if any man be found convicted of any such preaching, teaching, writing, or any manner of spreading abroad such doctrines as thou dost hold, or of helping forward any others in such doing, he shall be forthwith arrested and detained in prison, and judicially tried for the same. And if he do refuse duly to abjure these his errors, or after abjuration do relapse into them again, he shall be led unto some high spot, and there before the people shall be burned to death."

"I do remember me, sire, of the statute," said Lord Cobham.

"'Tis a statute which abideth yet in full force, Sir John."

"I wot it well, sire; albeit I wis likewise that yon grievous and fiery method of convincing a man's understanding commendeth not itself unto your royal wisdom."

"I deny not altogether that thou art in the right, Sir John," the king answered, after a slight pause. "I will even tell thee the truth. When Master Arundel and others did come unto me a while since, earnestly desiring to work their will upon thee, I did desire them that they should delay for a while. Of my royal determination to uphold the Church in its doctrine and its order and its unity, none need to doubt. Yet I* do greatly mislike and mistrust the use of those engines, which have for the most part been used against the truth, and do seldom aught of service unto the Church, save to work dissembled union and dissembled conversion. That unity which is the life of Christianity, because it keepeth up the love which is the fulfilling of the law, thou and such as thou do strive to subvert, Sir John."

"Sire, there can of a surety be no union nor unity save in Christ, and upon the teaching of His pure Gospel," said Lord Cobham.

King Henry passed over the words, and went on with his own remarks :—

"Therefore did I advise Master Arundel that he should in the first place make use of such mild persuasions and convincing arguments as did lie within his power, promising that I myself likewise would do even the same. Thou wittest how I have fulfilled mine behest."†

"Ye have been verily kind and patient unto me hitherto, and I do tender unto you my humble thanks, noble prince," said Sir John calmly.

"Thou wittest how I have fulfilled mine behest," repeated King Henry seriously. "I have spoken much and striven greatly with thee, Sir John, and have sought mine utmost to lead thee back into the fold from which thou hast wandered. Yet it meseemeth that thou dost

* Milton's History of England.

† Promise.

wax ever more contumacious against Holy Church. Soothly I ne love not harsh methods of handling, nor prisons, nor flames. But an the gentler mode of persuasion and argument do fail, what remaineth?"

"Methinks there be small portion of the Spirit of Christ in the bishops, sire, that they can thus lightly burn a man unto death, for that his thoughts run not in a groove with theirs."

"Sir John, I did remind thee a while since of a certain statute of my realm. Thou hast broken this statute. Thou meritest justly the penalty."

"In what wise, sire?"

"Thou shalt even condemn thyself with thine own lips. Hast thou ne preached not nor taught these Lollard doctrines which be opposed unto the decisions of Holy Church? Hast thou lent neither support neither countenance to them who do preach and teach the same? Hast thou no preaching priests in the dioceses of London and Rochester and Hereford, who do diligently spread abroad these errors, encouraged therein by thyself? Think'st thou these things may be done in open daylight, Sir John, and not be made known? I tell thee, I have had complaints many and grievous made unto me of thee and of thy doings. What hast thou to plead for thyself?"

"Sire, even the command of our Lord Christ: 'And he seide to him, Ye goyng into al the world, preche the Gospel to ech creature.'"

"Thou dost even put thine own interpretation upon Scripture words, making them to agree with thine own inclinations. Sir John Oldcastle, I do demand of thee solemnly—Wilt thou henceforth yield submission unto this statute and the ordinances of our Holy Church?"

"My lord king, methinks yon statute did emanate from

the Pope, himself, and no other," said Lord Cobham decidedly.

"An it be even so, Sir John, thou owest likewise obedience unto him, sith he is verily Vicar of Christ and head of the Holy Church throughout the world."

The king spoke with a frown of some displeasure. But Lord Cobham's answer came, prompt and undaunted, and with more earnest warmth than he had yet permitted himself to display—

"*You*, most worthy prince, am I ever ready to obey. Unto you, next to my eternal God, I do owe all and full obedience, and whatsoever ye command me, in the Lord, I do hold myself ready to fulfil. I have been ever hitherto a dutiful subject unto you, and do trust to continue the same. But as touching the Pope and his spirituality, I do verily owe them neither suit nor service; neither wis I on what foundation he doth claim his spiritual domination. As sure as God's word is true, I do know him by the Scriptures, as therein foretold, to be the great Antichrist—the son of perdition—the open adversary of God—and the abomination in the holy place."*

There was no mistake this time about the king's displeasure. The warm blood of the reformer, and the kindling desire for the honour of his Master's name, had carried him perhaps beyond the bounds of prudence. But the moment for speaking plainly had arrived. It was useless to dream of longer evading the danger which threatened him. Therefore uncompromisingly and calmly he made known his choice.

"Thou hast verily left me in small doubt as to thine evil inclinations, Sir John," said King Henry coldly and

* *Vide* accounts in Bp. Bale's, Gilpin's, Walter's, Foxe's, writings, etc.

sternly. "I wist not ever to hear such words from thy lips. I do warn thee once again that thou art travelling a downward road, the which thou shalt one day grievously repent. Further than this I do desire no further converse with thee. An thou dost come to a knowledge of thine errors, and art willing for to confess the same, and to shrieve thee unto a priest, soothly pardon awaiteth thee. For me, I have done mine utmost, and have failed. Thou mayest go, Sir John."

He bent his head in courteous but icy farewell. Lord Cobham silently submitted, and with all ceremony withdrew from the royal presence.

Alfgar, waiting patiently in the ante-chamber, scanned anxiously the face of his adopted father, when bidden to accompany him home, but could read little in those grave unruffled features. He ventured of course to put no questions, and the ride through the streets was one of considerable suspense to him. On arriving at the house, however, Sir John called him into his chamber and bade him sit down.

"My lord, hast thou aught of ill to tell me?" asked Alfgar fearfully, though with no fear for himself.

"What would'st thou deem to be ill, Alfgar?"

"Aught of evil that might hap unto thee, my lord."

"Forsooth, and it is not evil. '*Blessid* be thei that suffren persecucioun for rightwisnesse. . . . Ioye yee with yn forth, and glad yee with out forth."

"The persecution then verily cometh," said Alfgar.

"It cometh, and it cometh *nigh*! What would'st have, Alfgar?" and a smile lit up the knight's grave countenance. "If men be ready for to die for love and obedience unto an earthly king, how much more for our heavenly King? Thou wittest well I have much and many things which do make life joyous unto men. Yet it meseemeth that if need be

—for love of Christ, who hath died for me—I would even yield them all."

"If need be," repeated Alfgar.

"Ay—if need be! I will away to my castle on the early morrow, for to wait if this storm shall blow over mine head. Mayhap it will be even so—though methinks a second is like speedily to follow. An it may not be avoided—the will of my God be done."

"My lord, hath the king dismissed thee?" asked Alfgar; for Lord Cobham, as a servant of the household, was not free to go and come save by royal command or permission.

"I have deeply displeased the king, and he hath no more to say unto me," replied Lord Cobham quietly. "He hath not dismissed me, nor will I on the morrow await his dismissal. In the first heat of his anger, he will doubtless give unto Master Arundel such licence as he desireth concerning me. An I do remain here, 'twill be but to find me speedily within his clutches. An I do flee into my stronghold, 'twill delay matters awhile, and the king's wrath mayhap will soften. Methinks 'twould be small joy to him that his faithful servant did die the death purposed by Master Arundel. Thou wilt return with me, Alfgar. Perchance thy faithful devotion unto me draweth nigh unto its close."

Alfgar's lips trembled like a girl's, despite his manliness, and his eyes filled with tears. "My lord—my lord—say not so. I do but pray that I may die with thee—and God grant me this my request."

"Nay, Alfgar; an God doth call thee to die, then be thou ready for to die, and to fulfil His will; but an He calleth thee to live, then be thou ready for that also, and to work His work. Mayhap He will even call thee first, and not me; but truly it mesemeth that my days in this life are scarce like to be many."

CHAPTER XIII.

MARGARET'S CONFESSION.

"I WEEEN well that thou hast some sore trouble at thy heart, Margaret, and it grieveth me much that thou wilt not e'en let me to sorrow with thee."

Gytha Cheyne and Margaret Cobham were together in the garden, on the afternoon of the same day which had seen Alfgar's departure for London. They were busily gathering flowers for their lady's use, and a long thoughtful silence was suddenly broken by these words, in Gytha's gentle tones.

Margaret coloured suddenly, a quick bright crimson, but did not speak.

"'Tis not as I were a stranger and loved thee not," Gytha went on after a little break. "I marvel not that folks do bury in their own hearts their grief from stranger folks. But thou and I—to deem it needful that we do hide aught the one from the other—O Margaret, it showeth verily a lack of trust."

"I thank thee that thou dost not say a lack of love," Margaret answered huskily.

"Nay, that could I in no wise doubt. But thy trust in me—sweet Margaret, it lacketh."

Margaret dropped her flowers, turned towards Gytha, and taking both her hands, gazed steadily at her for some

seconds. The two faces were a contrast—one so dark and sad and agitated, the other so fair and serene.

"Thou shalt have thy will. I will make thee to know what thou dost desire. But oh, Gytha, mine own gentle Gytha, I beseech thee smile first upon me, as thou art wont; for after that which I have now to say, no smile from those sweet eyes will ever shine on me again."

"Margaret, thou seggist right strangely. Thou wittest scarce what thou sayest."

Gytha's grave wondering look was more than Margaret could stand, and she burst into tears.

"Sit thee down beside me here, and let me to wete* of all," said Gytha quietly, leading Margaret to a rough garden bench close at hand. "'Twill be less sad for thee than to bear thy burden alone, albeit alone need it never be."

"Alone it is, and hath been verily; oh, sorely alone," murmured Margaret. "But methinks 'twill be sadder and not less sad, when thy love too is gone from me."

"Thy trust lacketh again. Think'st thou my love be so frail in its nature?"

Margaret was silent for a minute, and then spoke abruptly—

"Gytha, dost thou deem me Lollard or nay?"

"Soothly, Margaret, I have of late wist not what to deem of this matter."

"I am Lollard in heart, and Catholic by profession. Gytha, I have denied the name of my Lord among men. I have sinned Peter's sin."

She turned away her head, with a low sob. But the hesitation which even Alfgar had shown was wanting here. Gytha simply laid a hand upon hers, and asked—

"Sweet Margaret, hast thou sought also Peter's for-

* Know.

giveness, which our Lord did so tenderly give unto him?"

"And thou canst love me even yet?" faltered Margaret.

"Forsooth, Margaret, thou dost deem lightly of my constancy. But I do marvel yet more at thine *other* lack of trust, even in Him, whose love changeth never."

"Gytha, He hath *not* forgiven me."

"Hast asked it of Him, Margaret?"

"How may I,—and persist yet in my lie?"

"Thou wilt persist no longer. Margaret, Margaret, these earthly things be nought, so that thou hast but His love."

"Dost deem it nought, Gytha, that thou and I will part—perchance for ever?"

Gytha grew pale, but answered steadily—

"Mayhap it will not be. Yet e'en that, for His dear sake, we might even bear. 'Tis not for ever, sweet Margaret. Awhile hence, and we will be together, and part never more."

"Methinks had I thy firm trust, I could weary sorely for that day," said Margaret, in a choked voice. "Life hath little of joy for me now. O Gytha, 'tis hard, 'tis hard to yield all."

"Hast thou measured the all which thy dear Lord did yield for thee?"

"Thou wittest no man may measure that. Yet my little seemeth much unto me."

"As it seemeth unto thee, so in a sense it seemeth unto Him. Sweet Margaret, He knoweth its true measure, as compared with the joy that awaiteth thee in the dwellings of the house of His Father, which He hath gone to make ready for us. But He doth also well know thy weakness, and He will give thee strength. O Margaret, mine own friend, thou wilt hold thee back no longer from the confessing of His name?"

"What would'st thou I should do, Gytha?" asked Margaret.

"What is it thou hast done, sweetheart?"

"'Twas when Reginald did pass hitherward, on his road to Canterbury. Gytha, dost remember the reading of Sir John Beverley one eve—of Peter and his sin? Reginald did put unto me the question of Lollardy or nay; and did say that were I disposed thereto, my mother would ne leave me here no longer."

"And thou——"

"And I did answer him, Nay."

Margaret lifted her face, which had sunk in her hands.

"And I did promise him he needed not to fear. Gytha, what would'st thou I should do?"

"I would have thee forthwith to write unto thy brother, and retract thy words. I see not what else remaineth unto thee."

"Think'st thou it be needful—awhile?" murmured Margaret. "He will journey hitherward again shortly, and I—if I do delay till then—'twill delay also awhile my going home—till he hath spoken with my mother. O Gytha, methinks there be many who do even thus."

"Mayhap. There be many who do even worse. Margaret, think'st thou, an the call to thine *other* home did suddenly come, thou could'st now lift thine e'en with full joy to meet thy Master's face, with thy denial of His name upon thy conscience still?"

Margaret shook her head.

"I will write," she said calmly. "I will write unto Reginald this even, for to have the letter ready, that it shall go so quickly as may be. Gytha, think'st thou I will be then forgiven?"

"'Tis not for me to say the word. Verily, sweetheart, as thou weepest at His feet, the gentle voice of the Lord

Himself, and none other, shall speak unto thine heart, and say, Thy ‘synnes ben forghouun to thee.’ He that ‘doeth a wey the synnes of the world,’ shall do away thy sin, in the blood which He hath shed. And, methinks, He will say naught unto thee of reproach, save that which He did speak unto Peter in like case with thee—‘Louest thou Me more than thes don,’ Margaret?’

“O Gytha, I do truly love Him from mine heart, and I wist it never before as now I do,” whispered Margaret.

“Forsooth, tell thus to Him, and pray Him to do all for thee that thou needest. Bethink thee, for comfort, of the words of Christ: ‘For which thing I seie to thee, manye synnes ben forghouun to hire, for sche hath loued myche; sothli, he to whom is lesse forghouun, loued lesse. Sothli Jhesu seide to hir, Synnes ben forghouun to thee.’”

And then Gytha rose from the seat, and drew some small writing-tablets from her pocket.

“See’st thou, sweetheart, I have these at hand. Wilt thou not be wise to set thy letter a-going, while thy heart is full, and thy will wavereth not? Methinks there is ever danger in delay. Thou may’st leave the flower-culling unto me.”

Margaret murmured her thanks, and sat long over the little tablets, writing sentence after sentence, somewhat laboriously, and with much cogitation about the spelling. Once in a while Gytha could see her tears falling, but the hard work of composition checked agitation. A good while passed away, and then Gytha came up.

“I have culled the needful flowers, Margaret. Art ready for to return?”

“Gytha, wilt thou read mine epistle? I will fairly write it out to-morrow, ready for such opportunity as may occur.”

Gytha perused the large crooked writing silently, and

then looked up at Margaret with tears shining in her eyes.

" Margaret, thou shalt have thy meed,"* she said softly. " Our Lord will ne forget not. Think thou upon His words : ' Euer man that shal knowleche Me before men, and I shal knowleche hym byfore my Fadir that is in hewenes.' "

" Aye, and verily I do wis the words which follow,— ' Sothely he that shal denye Me before men,—'"

" Thou hast done and past with that, even as Peter, after that his Lord had forgiven him."

And then they walked hand in hand towards the castle, feeling, both of them, that few weeks or months might remain of the dear and close intercourse which they had enjoyed, and that they must make the most of that little.

But the parting was nearer than either of them supposed.

Arriving at the drawbridge, Gytha, less absorbed in her own thoughts than Margaret, noticed a sound of unusual stir and bustle in the court-yard. Before she had time to make any inquiry, Thomas Brooke appeared under the portcullis, and dashed forward.

" Madame Margaret, thy brother, Sir Reginald, hath arrived."

" Reginald !"

The blood rushed back from her face, leaving her pale as ashes. The boy could not resist a curious glance.

" Hath he come since long time, Thomas ?" asked Gytha.

" 'Tis scarce an hour gone. Thou wilt find him in the hall, Madame Margaret. He did desire me to seek thee, and avise thee of his coming, sith thou wert gone so long. He did wax impatient."

* Reward.

Margaret moved on like one in a dream, tightening her grasp of Gytha's hand. What did it all portend?

Some signs of approaching supper-time were already visible in the great hall. Tables were being formed below, while on the dais stood Lady Cobham, conversing with Sir Reginald. She turned round at the entrance of the two girls, and Sir Reginald advanced to give them greeting, and to conduct them to her side. She laid her hand upon Margaret's, and started visibly at the cold chill of the fingers which her own encountered.

"Methinks thou art scarce more glad of thy brother's coming than I be. Hast heard the ill tidings that he bringeth?"

Margaret turned two alarmed eyes upon her brother.

"Ill tidings! nay—in what wise? My mother, Reginald——"

"'Tis thy mother's desire that I do carry thee home with me—for a while," said Reginald, hesitating over the last words.

"Awhile!" repeated Margaret faintly.

"Nought but a while," said Lady Cobham encouragingly. "We will sorely miss our bright Margaret, as heretofore; but 'twill be save for a while, as then—save for a few short months. Thou didst not grieve to go visit thy more distant kin, these three years since, and thou wilt not grieve to go unto thine own home."

Margaret looked steadily at her brother's face.

"Reginald, thou wittest well 'tis for no brief while that my mother doth desire my return."

"It dependeth upon thyself alone, and none other," he answered gravely. "'Tis question of——"

He paused, but Margaret's white lips said calmly—

"Of Lollardy."

"Thou speaketh sooth."

"Didst tell her what I once did say unto thee?"

"Aye, verily; but she misdoubteth. She hath writ unto me, and I have nought for to do but for to obey her will respecting thee."

"She hath reason for to misdoubt. Reginald—in very heart am I a Lollard, and have long been."

"Thou art!" said Reginald in astonishment.

"'Tis even so. I do henceforth cast in my lot with the persecuted followers of Christ our Lord. I do humbly beseech Him to grant me strength for to 'dwell stable unto the end.'*"

She drooped her head a little at first, but gathered strength and firmness as she went on. The clearly-uttered words could be heard all down the hall, and a moment's dead silence followed.

Sir Reginald's brow was drawn into a frown, and he looked appealingly at Lady Cobham.

"Silly wench, thou hast even lost thy head," she said, with would-be lightness. "'Tis no place here for the discussing of such matters."

"'Tis rightful place here, as elsewhere, fair cousin, for confessing of the truth," said Margaret calmly, though with a bright spot on either cheek. "Before this whole household have I long lived in false and shameful avowal of a faith which was not mine. And openly before the household do I desire to make known mine error."

"Nay, verily, thou hast avowed little in thine exceeding caution," said Lady Cobham.

"There be times when silence speaketh plainly as speech may do. Reginald, I would have thee know that I do speak thus, from no hasty resolve at sight of thee, and at hearing of my mother's purpose. See here; 'tis

* Matt. xxiv. 13.

but this morning that I have written these words unto thee."

He took the offered tablets, but simply said, as he did so—

"Thou wittest, I be no clerk."

Lady Cobham quietly motioned to the brother and sister and Gytha to follow her, as she swept through the nearest archway, and thence into the now deserted withdrawing-room.

"Methinks Margaret hath said already enough in the ears of all the world," she said coldly. "Thou mayest say thy say here, an thou wilt."

"Thou canst read my letter, Reginald," said Margaret. "Thy clerkly skill, albeit not equal unto Gytha's, is equal thereto, I wis well."

Sir Reginald did not seem to enjoy the task imposed upon him; but he frowned perseveringly over the tablets for some time. When he again looked up, it was with a mingling of evident relief at having reached the conclusion, and of no less evident displeasure at the contents of the said epistle.

"In good sooth thou speakest thy mind with full plainness. What think'st thou our mother will say unto this matter?"

"I am loath for to draw her anger upon mine head; but further can I not keep silence," said Margaret steadily, though with pallid lips.

Sir Reginald handed back the tablets, and merely observed—

"'Tis well, methinks, our mother desireth thy return."

"Thou wilt not hasten thy departure, Reginald," said Lady Cobham. "Thou wilt abide here a while—a few weeks—till my lord returneth."

"I thank thee in all courtesy, gentle cousin; but at latest I must away after the morrow."

Secretly, Sir Reginald not only desired to remove his sister as speedily as might be from Lollard influence, but had a certain dread of the infection for himself; otherwise he would have regretted more, on Eleanor Culpepper's account, the reasons which really did necessitate a hasty journey homeward.

Lady Cobham gave a little half shriek. "But two days! Reginald, thou art cruel—unknightly—thus hastily to separate our Margaret from us."

"Fair cousin, I would I could yield me to thy will, but 'tis not possible," Sir Reginald answered submissively. "'Tis in fulfilment of a vow, before the shrine at Canterbury, that I do thus hasten to be at Sterborough by a fixed day, for to offer up a pair of weighty waxen candles to our Lady in my Church, according to my behest."

"I wis well thou mayest not disregard thy vow," said Lady Cobham, too much accustomed to such matters to have any particular feeling of surprise; while Margaret remarked—

"Mayhap 'tis thy purpose, Reginald, for to offer up thy sister likewise at a Catholic shrine, and not alone thy pair of cierges."

"Nay, verily, I have nought to do save to carry thee unto thy mother."

"And well I wis what that portendeth," said Margaret calmly.

Gytha suddenly made a step forward.

"Sir Reginald," she said, "thou leadest now thy sister unto that which may prove to be sore and bitter danger. As very knight of chivalry, it behoveth thee that, whether with lance, or whether with will and word of mouth, thou dost defend her unto the utmost."

And then the horns sounded, and Lady Cobham led the way back into the hall. Sir Reginald looked rather perplexed at Gytha's suggestion. Somehow, the idea of chivalry in defence of Lollardism had a heterodox sound in his ears, though the appeal on behalf of a distressed damsel touched at once his knightly feelings of honour.

Supper went on as usual that night, with the concourse of guests and chance wayfarers; and squires and pages waited assiduously at the upper table, and the minstrels played stirring strains in the gallery above. And there was light talk and merry jest, as if no weight of dread and coming sorrow hung over the head of any present.

Margaret took her share in the conversation, though with an unwonted gentle dignity, which made her brother once and again look steadily at her, as if not fully recognising the sister he had formerly known. Others, who had marvelled over her strange depression since Sir Reginald's last visit, marvelled yet more to see her restored brightness this evening. It seemed as if her countenance had caught a reflection of Gytha Cheyne's ordinary sweet calm, while Gytha herself looked harassed and distressed, and grew whiter and whiter each minute as the meal dragged its slow length along.

It was over at last, and in the confusion following Gytha escaped unbidden to her chamber. Margaret did not miss her immediately, but hearing soon from one of the chambrières what had become of her, she excused herself from remaining longer downstairs, and likewise withdrew.

Gytha would be reading her Gospels, or maybe praying for her weak yet repentant sister-friend. That was what Margaret told herself, as she walked wearily yet not sadly up the narrow dusty stone stairs, and along a gallery, till the chamber was reached. But she had no expectation

at all of the sight which met her eyes, when she opened the door, and went in, and closed it behind her.

"Gytha! Mine own Gytha! What is it grieveth thee thus, sweetheart?"

For the calm self-command which Margaret had deemed as far removed from earthly influence as the calm of the ocean-depths—as little liable to be shaken by trouble as a moonbeam to be disturbed by a passing breeze—had broken utterly down under this blow. Almost prostrate upon the floor, with her slender bare arms crossed upon a low coffer, and her face hidden, and her long waves of unbound hair falling round her like a veil, Gytha lay overwhelmed by such a tempest of passionate anguish as rendered her unconscious even of Margaret's presence.

"Gytha—dost not hear me? Mine own levest*—sweetheart; 'tis thy Margaret! Wilt not tell me what grieveth thee?"

She sat down upon the ground, tears streaming from her own eyes, and drew the convulsed shuddering form of the heart-broken girl into her arms.

"Gytha—sweetheart—oh what will I do for thee! Thou wilt die, an thou dost not cease such weeping. What wilt thou have? Thou art not grieving thus for that I must leave thee? I am not worthy such sorrow, my Gytha, from one like thee."

She stroked softly the long bright hair, whispering a soothing word now and then, and waiting till the storm should have spent itself. Once, as it began to still, she tried asking the question—"What is it, sweet one—surely something else than that I must leave thee?" And then the terrible sobbing came back, seeming as if it would rend the very life away from the slight rigid frame. Others entered the room, but Gytha was utterly uncon-

* Dearest.

scious of their presence, and Margaret kept them all at a distance. With her own hands she followed Lady Cobham's advice to undress Gytha and put her to bed, but she would accept of no aid; and she, like Gytha, forgot that they were not alone, when she bent over her at the close.

“Wilt thou hear the Gospel, sweetheart?”

The quiet of exhaustion, though not of self-command, was already setting in, and by the time Margaret had read slowly aloud a few verses, weeping was at an end. Margaret put down the volume suddenly, and came again to the bedside.

“Thou wilt even sleep now, sweet one,” she said tenderly.

Gytha’s fingers clasped hers.

“Margaret—Margaret—’tis my doing,” she muttered hoarsely. “’Tis I who have avised thee what to do. An aught of evil do hap unto thee, ’tis I who must bear the burden.”

“An the Lord do call me for to bear aught of pain for Him, what call’st thou such a burden?” asked Margaret, a smile playing over her face. “Verily His ‘yoke is swete’ and His ‘charge is light.’ Up to this very morn I wist it not as I do wot it now.”

Gytha’s heavy swollen eyes looked up almost wonderingly at her.

“Nay, thou need’st not to marvel. ’Tis thy hand which hath drawn aside the curtain that did shield mine heart from joy. Methinks His love is dearer to me now than aught of earthly happiness. Sweet Gytha, I do give thee thanks past telling, that ere my brother did come the first step was taken. Otherwise verily might I have failed utterly. And thou—an thou canst grieve that thou hast led me aright—”

"'Tis not that," whispered Gytha; "save that I do fear for thee; and—O Margaret—'tis hard to part."

Tears fell again, though more quietly.

"'Tis but for a while," Margaret answered, seeming to have changed places with Gytha in her office of comforter. "Fear not, neither dread on my behalf. From ONE who loveth, can my mother nor my brother part me never. And He will give unto me that strength in which I most do lack. Verily, were I stronger in mine own self, thou mightest have cause perchance to fear. But in that I am a babe in weakness, and must needs rest me wholly upon Christ His strength—sith that can never fail, thou mayest trust for me, whatever shall befall."

And then Lady Cobham called Margaret away to her own chamber, and gave her some pieces of kindly-meant worldly-wise advice concerning the advantages of expediency, and the necessity of pleasing all parties, and the imprudence of talking too openly about matters of opinion. Margaret listened submissively, but with a sweet strange smile which promised no manner of compliance. After the holy strains of heavenly joy which seemed to have been borne in upon her heart, these words had a very earthly and discordant sound to her ears.

"Sothly he that shal denye me bifore men, and I shall denye hym before my Fadir whiche is in heuenes."

No better answer than that needed Margaret to meet all whispers of worldly expediency and attempts to serve two masters.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE KNIGHT'S RETURN.

RAIN fell heavily on the afternoon of the second day following. The courtyard was one mass of mud, and the wind howled past the castle-walls, and wailed drearily through towers and turrets. The very dogs crept under shelter, and Lady Cobham's chambrières were fain to spend the long hours in busy home employments. Spinning, embroidery, and needle-work obtained a more lengthened share of attention than they very often received on a summer's day ; the time between dinner and supper being usually devoted principally to out-of-door exercise or amusements. By about four o'clock, however, Lady Cobham began to detect some tired looks in her busy circle, and putting down the bliaut, or loose outer garment, which her own fair hands were fashioning into shape, she touched Gytha Cheyne's colourless cheek.

"Thou hast not moved, neither spoken, these two hours past, save for the motions of thy fingers. What art thinking, little one?"

Gytha looked up, with grey eyes so full of sadness as to render other explanation unnecessary.

"Nay, I will not have thee thus to grieve thy heart away. We have tint* our Margaret for awhile—but

* Lost.

'twill be but for awhile. Speedily will she lay aside these fantasies, with which *thou*, silly child, hast been at such pains for to stuff her brain, and we will even have her among us again as heretofore."

"An such be the only mode, I desire it not," Gytha answered low yet steadily.

"Methinks 'tis a right comfortless journey they will have this day," said Eleanor Savage. "Wittest thou an Margaret's palfrey hath learned for to swim? She will truly have small chance of safely proceeding otherwise."

The question raised a laugh, as Eleanor intended that it should; but the laugh was short and spiritless. There was a weight upon them all that evening, for Margaret Cobham was much beloved.

"I prythee, Gytha, look not thus dismal," she said impatiently. "Thou wilt verily set us all a-weeping in company."

The smile with which Gytha answered was sadder than her gravity had been.

"What would'st thou of me, Eleanor?" she asked simply.

"Soothly I would have thee look like unto thine own proper self. Thou hast nigh quenched thine eyes with tears. I marvel much, an I did go, if thou would'st thus grieve for me."

"Nay, nay, there be none that Gytha doth love like unto Margaret," said Lady Cobham half-jealously.

"I do love many, madame; albeit, not all of one fashion," said Gytha quietly.

"Dost love me, gentle one?" and Lady Cobham bent down smilingly to kiss her brow.

A dark gleam flashed into Joan's eyes, and she said hoarsely—"Tis pity thy brother be not here, Eleanor, for to ask that same question for himself."

"Methinks Arnold is like to be better employed elsewhere," said Eleanor carelessly. "He witteth over well already what answer he might look for to receive."

"Joan, thou art a forward wench," said Lady Cobham. Joan's full lips pouted unbecomingly.

"Mother, didst thou mark Arnold's breach of courtesy at the dinner? I did note him, where he sat, a-talking with folks, and ever patting of Hugo's head."

Lady Cobham was too much of a stickler for etiquette not to be duly shocked; but she softened the offence to the best of her ability by saying—

"Thou wittest Hugo is the dog that Gytha loveth best—wherefore I do marvel the less at his action. But truly I do recommend Gytha that she do lay her commands on him forthwith for to study the Book of Curteseye."

"I have nought to do with the laying of commands on Arnold Savage, save as any true esquire is the servant of any true dame," said Gytha quietly; and Lady Cobham's face wore a shade of displeasure.

Eleanor adroitly and kindly interposed with an apt quotation from the said volume—

"Whereso thou sitt at meat in borde,*
Avoide the cat at on bare worde;
For yf thou stroke cat other dogge,
Thou art lyke an ape teyghed with a clogge."

"I will speedily make known unto Arnold, madame, that thou dost deem him thus—even as a marmusette[†] attached unto a clog."

Eleanor looked mischievously at Gytha to see whether her joke was appreciated. Gytha did not even blush, but answered composedly—

"Sith he be such, methinks he had best loose him from the clog so speedily as may be."

* At table.

† Monkey.

" Mayhap he loveth his bondage over well, and desireth not for to be loose," said Eleanor ; and in a lower tone she added, " O Gytha ! Gytha ! a hard-hearted damsel art thou in good sooth."

Lady Cobham suddenly sprang to her feet, with clasped hands and an agitated flush upon her cheeks ; while the silk bliaut slipped downwards and lay on the ground at her feet.

" A horn ! Hearken ! My lord's horn ! 'Tis himself—himself—and no other. Dost hear, Gytha ?"

There was a moment of intense listening, and sure enough the faint sound of a distant blast came sweeping past upon the gale.

" To the drawbridge ! To the drawbridge with me. Gytha Cheyne, Eleanor Savage, Eleanor Culpepper, and Joan—I desire that ye attend me thither. My lord shall lack not his welcome were the weather ten times more tempestuous. To the drawbridge, and delay not."

With a rapid yet dignified step Lady Cobham traversed the long galleries which connected the castle-buildings, and on arriving at the nearest staircase to the gateway, descended the narrow stone steps, with her four damsels stepping after her. And there, at the moment that Sir John Oldcastle rode over the lowered drawbridge and beneath the grinning teeth of the portcullis, he saw his beautiful wife.

For a fair and high-born lady to have ventured out into such a sea of mud as the courtyard presented, would of course have been an impossibility, more especially as the rain was coming down in a perfect sheet of water from the mass of dense black clouds overhead. So she only stood there in the doorway of the tower, with her silken robes sweeping to and fro in the gusts of wind, and the flickering torches behind casting into strong relief her

stately winged head-dress and lovely dark face. The fairer countenances of her three elder chambrières showed more dimly behind, adding to the beauty of the singular picture.

Lord Cobham no sooner caught a glimpse of the group than he spurred his charger forward and sprang to the ground. Lady Cobham would have thrown herself into his arms, regardless of his dripping and mud-bespattered condition, but he held her gently aloof with his strong mail-clad hands.

“Nay, nay, sweetheart ; bide thee awhile till I be better fitted for thy touch. Alfgar—ay, thou mayst come with me.”

“But, oh, my lord, what bringeth thee home thus?” asked Lady Cobham, clasping her hands, as she led the way into a chamber near at hand. “Hast thou aught of evil to tell unto me?”

She motioned Gytha and Joan to follow her, and sent the other chambrières back to her own chamber. Alfgar’s light expeditious fingers began removing his lord’s heavy armour, piece by piece, and laying each upon one side. Sir John stood silently submitting to the operation, rather than assisting in it ; and there was a harassed abstracted look upon his face, which Gytha did not remember to have ever seen there before.

Lady Cobham’s question, if heard, was unanswered. She stood gazing anxiously at him, but did not repeat it, and only waited with what patience she could muster till it should please him to tell her all.

Surcoat and baudruck, dagger and hauberk, chasses and gambeson, capuchon and gorget, with all else pertaining to his knightly armour, being removed, Alfgar paused and awaited further commands. Sir John was standing, lost in a deep unwonted reverie, with his eyes fixed upon the ground, and his travel-stained doublet contrasting strongly

with his wife's delicate attire. Lady Cobham looked fearfully up into his absorbed face.

"My lord, my lord, thou art sore weary this even!" she faltered.

Her voice seemed to recall him, and he raised his eyes with a slight half-start of self-recollection.

"I be somewhat weary, fair Joan," he said; "but methinks, 'tis rather weariness of the heart than of the body, albeit the two do mayhap feel together."

"What hast thou, my lord, that troubleth thee? Wilt tell thy Joan?"

He looked down sadly at the beautiful dame.

"Ah me, Joan; it had been better for thee, mayhap, hadst thou never been mine. There come days, perchance, wherein thou shalt oftentimes say the like in thine heart."

"My lord, my lord, what words be these of thine?" she asked reproachfully. "Dost thou verily deem thy Joan to be thus fickle?"

"Nay, soothly; 'tis for thy sake I do regret, and for thine alone. Gentle dame, there doth a storm threaten, the which I wis not how I may avoid."

"The king," she said eagerly, "thine own true and fast friend, my lord,—*he* of a surety will save thee from the hands of these blood-thirsty prelates; and the danger be from them."

"'Tis from no other. *Thy* spiritual lords and teachers, my Joan—how cleapest thou them by so ill a name?"

"'Tis for fear and not for love that I do hold unto them, as thou wittest well. My lord, how of the king?"

"I have sore vexed and deeply angered his grace, my Joan, so that he desireth no further converse with me."

She wrung her hands despairingly, while all colour fled from cheek and lip.

" My lord—oh thou of a surety wert even mad ere thou could'st thus cast away thy sole and only hope!"

" Nay, verily, I have another and a mightier hope, fair Joan. I rest me not upon the love of an earthly king, else were I soothly now in evil case."

" Hath the king dismissed thee hither?" she asked.

" Nay; hither have I come, but 'tis of mine own will, and not of the king's," he answered.

" I do fear me there hath been grievous misavising," she said hesitatingly.

" What would'st thou, my Joan? 'Tis of no man's avising that I have acted thus. But verily had I remained in London yet another day, I had ere this night found myself within Master Arundel his clutches."

" They be grievous mawferours,* he and his following," said Lady Cobham warmly. " My lord, what next wilt thou do?"

" Await here awhile, my Joan, for to see if mayhap the king's wrath shall presently soften. Soothly have I been his faithful servant hitherto; and an he do have time for to cool him, methinks he will not greatly love to see aught of ill hap unto me."

" And if he soften *not*," she said with trembling lips. " If his wrath burn on uncooled—if there be no path of safety for thee, save that thou do retract from these thine—thine errors—as the king doth deem them—"'

" An such be so, let the king work his will upon me, whatsoever it shall be," Lord Cobham answered calmly. " I am even ready, gentle Joan, for that which my Lord shall call upon me for to endure."

And turning from his weeping wife, Lord Cobham said kindly to Gytha—

* Evil-doers.

"Who think'st thou, fair Gytha, we did meet to-day upon the moor?"

Gytha looked perplexed for a moment; and then, as she glanced at Alfgar, and was struck by the cold pale stillness of his face, the truth flashed across her.

"Sir Reginald—Margaret—" she exclaimed.

"Even so. 'Twas a marvel unto me to see her there; and she did tell me 'twas in the cause of Lollardy that she and we did need to part. Save for that I wis nougħt. There was no shelter at hand, and the tempest was right heavy thereabout. She wept somewhat at the last, when I did commend her unto God's blessing. But I looked not to see our light-hearted Margaret thus in the forefront of the battle."

"She hath not been light of heart for a while past," said Lady Cobham. And as she and Sir John went into the particulars of the matter together, with Joan listening, Alfgar stepped back to Gytha's side.

"Did'st speak with her, Alfgar?" she asked in a low tone, her heart aching for him.

"But a word. Sir Reginald did keep right jealous watch over her. O Gytha, 'tis hard to think—our bright—our noble Margaret—"

"Nobler now than ever in the past," said Gytha gently. "What said she unto thee?"

"She did let me take her hand; but when I said, 'Thou wilt yet one day be mine, Margaret,' she made answer, 'Nay, I leave thee free. We say farewell, perchance for ever in this life! But there abideth the Father's dwelling above, and I too, with thee, am now on my road thitherward.'"

Alfgar's voice failed for a moment.

"Could'st thou have seen her face—in its wondrous sweetness. O Gytha, mine own heart was nigh to break-

ing; but she looked and spake full calmly, till at the last she did weep under Sir John's right tender blessing."

"Had she no word to send by thee to me?" asked Gytha.

"She forgot thee not. 'Give unto gentle Gytha my loving greeting,' quoth she, 'and bid her that she grieve not for me.' And then did she smile and say, 'Thou wilt even pray for me, kind Alfgar, for verily I am weak, and the path ahead sheweth somewhat dark. But there shineth a light of glory at the close.' And afterward she turned her unto Sir John, and saith unto him, 'Tis for the cause of our Lord's pure Gospel that I do thus leave them whom I most do love. Although I have grievously sinned and denied His Name, yet giveth He me this great honour, to witness yet for Him. Fair cousin, I crave thy blessing ere we do part;' and when he did give it unto her she wept sadly, yet through her tears she did give unto us a smile, ere she drew close her wimple, and rode away."

Alfgar lingered over the words of that last meeting, as if he could hardly bear to end his narration. And then he put his hands over his face, and sighed long and heavily.

"O Gytha, I do fear me—I do sorely, sorely fear—that 'tis farewell for ever in this life."

CHAPTER XV.

CITATIONS.

HOUR by hour the coils were tightening round their victim. Week by week, in those late summer and early autumn days of the first year of King Henry's reign, the clouds grew blacker over Lord Cobham's head.

A messenger appeared before the Castle gates one afternoon, demanding leave to enter. He had come from the Archbishop, and his business was to cite the knight to appear before the primate on a certain day, to answer the charges brought against him. Sir John quietly refused to admit the man within his stronghold; whereupon, in obedience to previous directions, the messenger rode away. Lord Cobham was as a king in his own domain, and none might dare attempt to force an entrance without his permission.

It was but a short breathing-space which followed. The summoner made his appearance a second time without the walls, and this time he was accompanied by Master John Butler, Doorkeeper of the King's Privy Chamber, who had been expressly bribed for the purpose. The Archbishop's trick was so far successful that Master Butler was admitted, under the supposition that he had been sent by the king.

He lent himself to this supposition, and urged upon

Lord Cobham the king's desire that he should obey the citation. Sir John replied that he by no means intended to consent unto such priestly practices. Master Butler endeavoured to press the matter, and to obtain leave for the summoner to enter. It was decidedly refused. Might he then send the summons by letter? No; Sir John would have nothing to do with it. He ignored utterly from first to last the Archbishop's motions in the matter.

Affairs having reached this climax, the primate took the next step which lay in his power. A written summons was fastened upon the great gate of Rochester Cathedral, citing the knight to appear before the Archbishop on the eleventh of September following. A few hours later and the paper had vanished, being torn down by an unknown hand. The displeased Archbishop set up fresh letters, but they disappeared in like manner. And meantime the eleventh of September drew nigh.

There was a strange sort of sad uncertainty about the Castle life those days. Almost all within its walls felt that a change was impending, and a change fraught with terrible peril to the beloved head of the household. Sir John himself was calm and cheerful, though at times somewhat grave; but there was little of mirth to be seen among the faces of his followers; and Lady Cobham fluctuated hourly from fear to hope, and hope to depression, till the constant pressure of anxiety threatened to tell seriously upon her health. With something of almost childish wilfulness, in all her graceful high-born dignity, she could never rest unless Gytha were by her side; and the all-important topic of Lord John's danger was discussed by those two, hour after hour, till Gytha grew heart-sick with the ceaseless unavailing talk. Her own temperament would have inclined her to patient silent waiting for the unfolding of events, and

habitual readiness for action at the right moment. Lady Cobham, on the contrary, could never restrain herself from speaking of that which filled her mind. If she argued herself into good spirits one hour, she argued herself into despair the next. It was a perfect treadmill of talk, and Gytha had to bear the brunt of it. Her patience was scarcely equal to the task at times.

One bright side she had to look upon, and one only. Her wedding with Arnold Savage, which was to have taken place this autumn, was now postponed for awhile. "Till the spring," Lady Cobham said; and then Sir John remarked half-sadly—"Ah, sweetheart, we know not what may befall us ere the spring-tide!" And Lady Cobham, as usual, broke into weeping, and the subject had to be put aside.

Sorrowful as the cause might be, Gytha could not but rejoice in this respite. She felt almost ashamed of her own lightness of spirits when the decision was first made known to her; and her sunny face drew a cloud of ten-fold gloom upon Arnold's disappointed brow. She was hardhearted enough not to be troubled at all about that matter, being very comfortably secure that he could find ample consolation in the tilt-yard when it pleased him.

But these were no days for high spirits, and the weight of anxiety in the household soon pressed down anything of over-cheerfulness which had showed for awhile in Gytha. Those hours of melancholy discussion with Lady Cobham could not but imbue her with no small measure of the baroness's depressed expectations. The parting too with Margaret Cobham had left a sorrow which time alone could soften; and the utter uncertainty as to what Margaret's life at home might be, often lay like a load at her heart.

The eleventh of September came and went, and Sir

John had quietly disregarded the episcopal citation. Sir Roger Acton and Sir John Beverley were a good deal at the Castle about this time, and frequent private conversations took place between the leaders of the Lollard party. Alfgar held as much as possible aloof from these closetings, though more than once invited to be present. "Thou art as mine own son, and I desire not to hide aught from thee," Lord Cobham said more than once. But Alfgar only answered—"My lord, I do desire to act faithfully by thy commands, whatsoever they be, but I care not yet to adventure myself beyond the line of simple obedience." And Sir John, half-smiling, yielded the point without further controversy. On one question Alfgar had fully made up his mind; and that was, personally, at any risk, and against all odds, to defend his master from danger. With respect to any wider combination for either active or passive defence of the Lollard party against persecution he had his doubts, and therefore remained quiescent. It seemed to him that Lord Cobham followed much the same course, hearing all that might be said, but reserving for a while the expression of his own judgment.

One afternoon, about the middle of September, Gytha's light footfall might have been heard passing swiftly from Lady Cobham's chamber towards the round tower-cell, to which Sir John habitually retired for purposes of reading and writing. Alfgar was standing outside, keeping watch, still as an image of stone.

"May I enter, Alfgar?" she asked softly.

"My lord desired that none might causelessly hinder him this day in his work."

"I have a message unto him from our lady."

Alfgar shook his head a little.

"I doubt me he will not list thee yet awhile. There

hath come a letter unto him, which meseemeth hath troubled him. Tell it to none other, Gytha. But he desired for a while to be alone."

The brother and sister stood looking uncertainly at one another. Before they could come to any decision Sir John's deep voice was heard—

"Alfgar!"

"My lord!" and Alfgar opened the heavy door, thereby disclosing the small bare apartment, with its coffer and its bench, and its one table bearing a weight of MSS. upon it.

"Thy sister may enter."

Deeply absorbed as he looked, they marvelled that he could have heard her gentle voice. She came forward quietly, and with his never-failing courtesy he arose.

"Hast a message for me, gentle one?"

"My lady greatly desireth converse with thee, my lord. She maketh complaint that she hath scarce seen thee the livelong day."

"I have been sore busied, and I am busy yet. Gytha—little one;" and with fatherly fondness he laid one hand on her head, and turned up her face to his own; "Tidings have reached me, for the which I have hitherto waited."

"Tidings?" she repeated anxiously.

"Of Master Arundel his doings."

Gytha clasped her hands involuntarily. "Oh, my lord, what doth he now?"

"He hath cited me afresh for to appear before him upon the Saturday which cometh after the Feast of St. Matthew. In the mean time hath he excommunicated, and sorely cursed me, with many bitter words, cleping me a seditious apostate, heretic, schismatic, troubler of public peace, enemy of the realm, adversary of the Church, and I know not what all."

"My lord, art thou grieved at the honour thus laid upon thee?" asked Gytha, for there was something of sadness in the steadfast manly tones.

"Think'st thou that thou wouldst not be grieved in like case?"

"I know not; but sith it be for Christ His glory, methinks it should be rather rejoicing than sorrowing."

"Thou thinkest rightly of a surety, gentle Gytha. Neither would I have it otherwise; nethetheless that I would take what means do lie in my power for to ward off this threatening peril."

Alfgar looked up with a sudden glance of something like fear. Was it to be a question of resistance—open and proclaimed? But Lord Cobham's next words were very wide of the mark.

"I have this day written a paper for to present unto the king, to make clear unto him that which is in very truth the belief of mine heart before God. These men do falsely accuse me of many things, the which I neither do say nor allow. I would fain the matter should be made clear unto his grace the king; and methinks he will then even soften his wrath toward his faithful servant."

"And thou wilt send it unto him by a messenger, my lord?" asked Alfgar, again fearing the answer, and this time with reason.

"Nay; rather will I present it unto him mine own self, and seek mine utmost to win again his confidence. Think not I put over-much trust in the love and kindliness of an earthly ruler, Alfgar. Verily I have small cause to rest me wholly upon him. But I see not what other course or hope of safety lieth open unto me. I must e'en do mine utmost, and further, when I have so done, I am content to await the will of my God."

Then, making Gytha sit down upon the coffer, he began

quietly reading to them the said "Belief." It opened with familiar words to their ears—

"I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. And in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord, which was conceived of the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered death under Pontius Pilate, crucified, dead and buried, went down to hell, the third day rose again from death, ascended up to heaven, He sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty, and from thence shall come again, to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost, the universal holy Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the uprising of the flesh, and everlasting life. Amen."

Then came some enlargement of this belief, under the different heads ; in part, as follows :—

"Moreover I believe that the same Jesus Christ our Lord, thus being both God and man, is the only Head of the whole Christian Church. . . . And this most holy Church I think to be divided into three sorts or companies.

"Whereof the first sort be now in heaven, and they are the saints from hence departed. . . .

"The second sort are in purgatory (if any such be by the Scriptures) abiding the mercy of God, and a full deliverance of pain. . . .

"The third sort are here upon earth, and be called the Church militant. . . .

"This latter congregation by the just ordinance of God is also severed into three diverse estates, that is to say, into priesthood, knighthood, and the commons. Among whom the will of God is, that the one should aid the other, but not destroy the other. The priests, first of all, secluded from worldliness, should conform their lives utterly to the examples of Christ and His apostles. Ever-

more should they be occupied in teaching and preaching the Scriptures purely, and in giving wholesome counsels of good living to the other two degrees of men. More modest also, more loving, gentle, and lowly in spirit, should they be than any other sorts of people.

“In knighthood are all they which bear sword by law of office. These should defend God’s laws and see that the Gospel were purely taught ; conforming their lives to the same, and secluding all false preachers ; yea, these ought rather to hazard their lives than to suffer such wicked decrees as either blemish the eternal Testament of God, or yet let* the free passage thereof, whereby heresies and schisms might spring into the Church. . . . They ought also to preserve God’s people from oppressors, tyrants, and thieves ; and to see the clergy supported, so long as they teach purely, pray rightly, and minister the sacraments freely. And if they see them do otherwise, they are bound by law of office to compel them to change their doings, and to see all things performed according to God’s prescript ordinance.

“The latter fellowship of the Church are the common people, whose duty it is to bear their good minds and true obedience to the aforesaid ministers of God, their kings, civil governors, and priests. The right office of these is justly to occupy, every man in his faculty, be it merchandise, handicraft, or the tillage of the ground ; and so one of them to be as an helper to another, following always in their sorts the just commandments of their Lord God.

“Over and besides all this I most faithfully believe that the sacraments of Christ’s Church are necessary to all Christian Believers ; this always seen to—that they be truly ministered according to Christ’s first institution and ordinance. . . . I believe in that sacrament (of the altar)

* Hinder.

to be contained Christ's body and blood under the similitudes of bread and wine. . . . I also believe the universal law of God to be most true and perfect. . . . Finally, this is my faith also, that God will ask no more of a Christian believer in this life, but only to obey the precepts of that blessed law. If any prelate of the Church requireth more or else any other kind of obedience than this to be used, he contemneth Christ, exalting himself above God, and so becometh an open antichrist. All these promises I believe particularly, and generally all that God hath left in His Holy Scripture that I should believe; instantly desiring you, my liege lord and most worthy king, that this confession of mine may be justly examined by the most godly-wise and learned men of your realm. And if it be found in all points agreeing to the verity, then let it be so allowed, and I thereupon holden for none other than a true Christian. If it be proved otherwise, then let it be utterly condemned, provided always that I be taught a better belief by the Word of God, and I shall most reverently at all times obey thereunto."

Frank, calm, and simple—straightforward, fearless, and outspoken—the confession of the man was like to the man himself. It was the confession of one feeling his way out of darkness into the light, and not yet entirely free from the trammels in which he had been bred, but very uncompromising in the use of such light as he already possessed. It was a faithful reflection of the age in which he lived. Truly Sir John's brief exposition of the character of a "verray knight" in those olden days, was a faithful sketch of his own self.

"But oh, my lord," said Gytha mournfully, as he came to the end of his reading, "I deem there be little hope that the king will more lovingly regard thee after the seeing thy confession!"

CHAPTER XVI.

BIDDING FAREWELL.

A SMALL group of horsemen, ready equipped for a long day's journey, stood just within the courtyard gateway, till the moment came to start. A fairer September day could hardly have been chosen for their travel, yet the faces around were by no means in unison with the sunshine overhead. Alfgar's own steed was kept quiet by Thomas Brooke, while Alfgar himself, his slight figure encased in shining armour, and a helmet over his bright brown hair, stood with one gauntleted hand upon the stirrup of Lord Cobham's favourite jet-black charger.

A few paces distant stood Lord Cobham himself, similarly "harnessed," but with the addition of the golden spurs and other marks of knighthood, and a short dark velvet mantle over his shoulders. A weight of sorrowful tenderness rested on his brow, as he supported the half-convulsed and sinking form of his beautiful lady in his arms, vainly striving to soothe her grief. Many of the young chambrières around were sobbing from sympathy. Well might poor Lord Cobham have asked the question of St. Paul himself, "What mean ye to weep and to break mine heart? for I am ready not to be bound only but also to die . . . for the Name of the Lord Jesus." But he only looked across in mute appeal to

Gytha, as she stood pale and quiet by her brother's side ; and she instantly stepped forward.

" Madame—sweet Dame—bethink thee, this is but a sorrowful departure for our dear lord," she said gently and steadily, though her lips were quivering. " Wilt thou not give him a smile to speed him on his way ? "

" O Gytha—Gytha ! an he cometh not back to me, mine heart will verily break," sobbed the dame.

" If it do please God, he shall return," said Gytha. " Bethink thee, sweet Dame—" and she bent down to whisper the words ; " will it not be a sore grief of heart unto thee, when he hath gone, that thou hadst no brave word of cheering to give unto him ! An he do come back speedily, thy tears be not needed. An he do go unto prison and danger—the which may God avert—the more need that thou give him if but one smile to be comfort and strength unto him. Bethink thee, dear Dame, of thy noble race. Thou would'st not thus grieve were he a-carrying of his banner into France ; yet he goeth now unto a greater warfare and a higher. Sweet dame, I pray thee, look up, and speed him cheerily on his way."

" Thou art right, and speakest words of sooth," said Lady Cobham, relaxing her tight grasp, and checking her flow of tears. She stood upright as she spoke, put back her veil, and with one half-unconscious gesture caused her mantle and her robe to fall into their usual graceful flow of folds. Her soft dark eyes, beautiful even now, though swelled and reddened with weeping, looked up steadily with a forced smile, into her husband's, as she laid one hand upon his arm, and another upon Gytha's. " See'st, sweetheart—thou hast *not* a coward heart in me, though perchance it did seem unto thee thus. I will e'en speed thee on thy way with a smile. 'Tis verily a noble

warfare in which thou fightest. Oh, I would thy poor weak Joan had strength of heart for to do the same"—and forgetting her boast of a moment earlier, a sob broke from her. "I am not Lollard, my lord, yet 'twill harm thee not to pray, in Lollard likeness—the Lord go with thee, wheresoever thou dost go."

"Mine own Joan; would God thou wert indeed of like mind with me," he said mournfully. "Then had the parting lost for me the half of its bitterness."

"'Twill not be a parting for long, my lord; thou wilt speedily return—speedily, speedily."

Poor heart, looking and longing to be assured of that which she well knew was so likely not to be! She watched his face eagerly, but he only said—

"An the Lord do prosper me, sweet Joan. If it be His will that I come not speedily again, His will be done, and I ask nought else."

"Thou must come. Thou must. Oh, say not fare-well—yet; oh, bide yet awhile. O my lord—mine own Lord John."

And she was breaking again into passionate lamentations, but a touch of Gytha's cold fingers recalled to her the resolution she had just made to be calm. Again she stood up, with a forced pitiful smile trembling on her white lips. Lord Cobham could stand the scene no longer. A gesture brought Alfgar and the black steed to his side.

"Sweet Joan, I must begone," he said low and huskily. "Thy prayers, but *not* thy tears, I ask. Read the Gospels for thy comfort when I be away, my Joan. Gentle Gytha, till I do see my lady again, she is thine especial charge." His hand rested for a moment on the girl's head bent humbly before him. "Bless thee—God bless thee, little one," he murmured brokenly. "Like unto

mine own do I love thee. Thy brother I will to the utmost of mine ability shield from danger. Farewell, little Joan; be thou a right loving and tender daughter. Farewell to ye all. My Joan, farewell—farewell to thee."

She let him loosen her clasp, and stood firmly when he would have put her into the arms of her attendant maidens. One spring, and, heavily mailed though he was, the back of the tall steed was gained. Almost at the same moment Alfgar followed suit; and amidst tearful smiles and waving hands, Sir John, at the head of the little troop, rode over the drawbridge and disappeared.

"To the Keep! To the Keep, maidens!" It was Lady Cobham's voice which spoke, and Lady Cobham herself led the way. A few minutes sufficed for mounting the dusty stairs, and a cluster of tall white head-dresses soon appeared on the summit—Lady Cobham's gauzy veil glittering in the sunshine, conspicuous among all the rest. Winding away at a little distance they could see the party of mail-clad troopers, with the gallant chief at its head. And all at once Sir John looked round, and rose in his stirrups to acknowledge the fluttering of scarfs from the keep. Something light and silvery-looking appeared in his hand.

"O Gytha! 'Tis my scarf—mine own," said Lady Cobham eagerly. "He hath carried it with him. He loveth it for my sake."

And then she burst into tears again, and, the troop being now hidden by a rising ground, made her way to her own chamber. Gytha would have remained with her, but was refused. "I will e'en be alone awhile; methinks 'tis best," said Lady Cobham. "I must fain weep for him, Gytha. And think'st thou not—although I be not Lollard—I may e'en pray for him, and not harm by my praying?"

"Sweet Dame, no prayers may ever harm," said Gytha confidently. "He did earnestly ask thee so to do."

And finding her presence unneeded, she made her way up again to the top of the keep, from sheer weariness and restlessness of spirit. It seemed to her almost impossible to settle down to spinning and embroidering yet awhile.

Most of the chambrières had by this time gone down the stairs. Eleanor Savage, one of the last, was just about to follow Joan, who pushed sullenly by Gytha without speaking. She stopped, however, and asked,—

"Aught else to be seen, Gytha? What art thou returning here for?"

"I scarce know—"

Gytha could hardly speak, and stood with a hand on the parapet, and a pair of tear-dimmed eyes looking in the direction where the travellers had disappeared.

"Thou wilt see them no more," began Eleanor, referring only to the present moment; but Gytha started sharply, as if the words had a terrible sound of foreboding, and Eleanor gazed at her in amazement. "Why, Gytha, thou art pale as death. Thou didst not look thus yonder in the court. I did say nought to grieve thee thus."

"Save—for the seeing of them no—no more," faltered Gytha, pressing a hand tightly on her chest in the struggle to be calm. "Thou didst not mean so to say."

"Thou canst see them no more from this spot. I had thought of nought else. Gytha," and she spoke kindly; "it meseemeth ever best to look not for trouble till it do come. I love not to fret me needlessly. Mayhap the king will turn him about even yet, and show himself as of old towards Lord Cobham."

"Mayhap. But an he do not so—"

"What think'st thou will hap unto us, an it be even as thou dost fear?" asked Eleanor anxiously.

"I know not. It matters little. 'Tis for him and for Alfgar I do dread."

"I do believe it. Thou art a strange maiden, Gytha. For myself, I deny not to have somewhat of care for mine own happiness."

"Neither do I for myself deny the same. But verily at a time like unto this it behoveth each one of us to set thought of self aside."

"Dost thou so? In good sooth think'st thou never of thyself, nor of Arnold?"

Gytha's white cheeks flushed a little.

"Soothly, Eleanor, I do think with joy of the putting off of that which I did sorely mislike and dread. I would think of himself never again at all, an he would but leave me to be in peace."

"Hast not softened toward him yet?—not e'en for the thought of the service he did render of late unto our lord."

"The service?"

"Ay, verily; since 'twas his hand which did aid in the tearing down of the summonses from the gates of the monastery."

"I doubt me he did small benefit unto my lord thereby, save for the making known that folks' hearts went with Sir John, and ne went not with his persecutors. An Arnold's fingers had moved never for the purpose, an hundred other hands had been ready to the work."

"Gytha, thou wilt one day yet learn to love Arnold."

"Thou wittest well it may never be. I desire not for to hear of him this day. Mine heart is over full with thought of them who have left."

"Nor thine alone. Gytha, deem me not of an unfeel-

ing spirit," said Eleanor in a more subdued tone than was her wont. "I too, though I do talk in lightsome fashion, have mine heart full. Methinks none might know our Lord Cobham and love him not."

It was easy to see round the supper-table that evening how fully all present, down to the very lowest of the retainers, sympathized in the sorrow which had fallen upon the household—only a threatening shadow as yet, but a shadow which might all too soon deepen into dire reality.

Night passed, and another day, and yet another night, and another day, each dragging its weary length along. But a third night was not to pass without news.

The supper-horns had sounded, and Lady Cobham, with a sorrowful face, was taking her solitary seat in the place of honour. The whole household, with the usual complement of passing guests, were likewise all arranged either on the dais or at the lower tables, each individual according to his or her degree. The squires and serving-men had begun to drape the long white table-cloths, and the minstrels in the gallery were desired to come to the meal, since Lady Cobham could bear no musical sounds that day. And just at this moment, something of an outside stir became audible.

"Madame ! Madame ! 'tis Alfgar !"

The words burst from Gytha involuntarily, in tones sharpened by mingled relief and dread. Alfgar was safe. But Lord Cobham!—how about Lord Cobham? Had he also arrived, Alfgar's face would not thus have appeared alone in the farthest archway.

Gytha was the first to spring to her feet ; and then, as if moved by some simultaneous impulse, every man, woman, and child in the hall arose, and stood waiting for what would come next. Lady Cobham alone sat still,

with her hands clasped loosely together, and a faint red spot on either cheek.

The rush of startled wondering exclamations which greeted Alfgar's arrival, died away into deadly awe-stricken silence. Men looked at each other, each half-fearing to read in his neighbour's face that which he knew must show in his own ; and blanched lips formed the questions which none liked to utter aloud ; but no word or sound came from Alfgar. In dusty travel-stained armour, with bent head and dejected mien, he passed up the full length of the hall, greeting none by the way, till he reached the dais, and there made deep befitting reverence to the dame ; but still he did not speak.

CHAPTER XVII.

A PRICK.

"WHAT tidings, Alfgar?"

Changed and hoarse though the tone was, Lady Cobham spoke calmly. Now that the worst threatened, her woman's courage seemed to rise to the occasion. And that the worst did really threaten, it was easy to see in the young squire's haggard look and pallid lips.

Alfgar tried to speak, but words seemed to have forsaken him, and he staggered forward a pace as if hardly able to stand. Lady Cobham laid a hand kindly upon his arm.

"Thou art faint and worn, poor lad, with sorrow and travel. Hast tasted nought this day, I will be bound. But thou must tell me, Alfgar, and delay not; where hast left my dear lord?"

"Madame—he hath—he hath been taken—"

"Whither? In this short space of time they cannot yet have wreaked their vengeance on him." Yet a look of agonized suspense came into her face. "Speak—speak, I command thee, Alfgar."

"To the Tower," muttered Alfgar half-inarticulately.

"Ah!" and a deep low groan passed through the hall.

"They will not—may not—cannot harm him," said

Lady Cobham passionately. "So noble, so great, so brave. Oh, they cannot of a surety find it in their hearts. Speak, Alfgar, speak ; tell me all, I beseech thee. Stay, thou art weary ; sit thee down. Give unto him wine, maidens, for to refresh him."

"Nay ; some water—prythee, Gytha."

He drank a long feverish draught of the cold spring water, but resolutely put aside the wine, in unwonted opposition to the lady's mandate. "'Tis best so. I require not wine this day, madame. I am ready now to tell ye all the little I do know concerning my lord."

Lady Cobham sat down again and waited anxiously.

"Didst go with him to the king's presence?" she asked, as he seemed to hesitate how to begin.

"Nay, madame ; Lord Cobham went thither alone, leaving me without, as is his wont when he visiteth the king in his chamber. Methinks it had been better otherwise."

"What did they unto him?"

"'Twas not long that I did attend without. Sooner than I had looked for to see him, my lord did reappear —under a guard. And as he did see me, he spake unto me : 'I am away to the Tower, by order of the archbishop, and of the king.' Then saith he, 'See that thou bear these tidings unto our lady, and that she be told right gently.'

"And thou—what didst thou say?"

"Madame, I scarce know what next I did, save that in my frenzy of grief I did speedily find myself at his feet. The guard !—nay, madame, they did somewhat roughly resist of a surety ; but methinks I could sooner have died, than missed the parting blessing of him—my father—" and a choking passionate sob broke from the young squire. "I did crave and beseech to be permitted

to go with him ; but this was denied me, and my lord himself did say—‘Nay, thou must e'en go unto my dame, and make known unto her that which hath befallen me.’ Then did he bless me most lovingly withal, and in the midst thereof they did force me aside, and hasten him onwards. But methinks I have oft seen my lord of a more troubled countenance, than he did then show.”

“Can’st tell us nought, Alfgar, of his interview with the king in the privy chamber ?” asked Lady Cobham tearfully.

“Madame, I did seek to discover for thee all so much as did lie in my power ; but men’s reports of the same did somewhat differ. My lord carried thither with him the Confession of his Faith, which he hath written, and did seek to present it unto the king ; but the king would in no wise look at it, desiring him the rather to present it unto such prelates as should be his proper judges. The king did show unto him a marvellous cold and silent demeanour. Then did Lord Cobham make offer for to bring forward an hundred knights and esquires, for to bear testimony concerning the innocency of his life and his opinions, and to make clear the same in the eyes of all men. Also Lord Cobham did profess himself ready cheerfully to fight, after the laws of chivalry, with any living man, in the defence of his faith, save and except only not with the king himself, nor with the lords of his council. But the king would thereto by no means agree.

“Thereupon entered a person into the chamber, and in presence of the king did cite Lord Cobham for to appear before the archbishop upon the twenty-third day of this month. One saith that Lord Cobham did immediately exclaim : ‘Sith I can obtain no other justice, and nought else remaineth, I do even appeal unto the Pope

at Rome.' And that the king, 'mighty angered, did vehemently make answer : 'Thou shalt never prosecute thine appeal ; but shalt even tarry in hold till such time as thou shalt be judged by Master Arundel.' But me-thinks 'twere little like his lordship thus to appeal unto one whom he deemeth even as Antichrist."

"Perchance he did but make copy of St. Paul, who did likewise make appeal unto an heathen monarch," said Gytha.

"Mayhap. If he did do it, he had doubtless his wise reasons. Perchance 'twas a hasty word ; but one saith he had even his appeal writ on paper, and in his hand, and did offer to show it unto the king. The interview did speedily thereafter close ; for the king, finding my lord did in no wise consent for to meekly submit himself unto the Church's censure, and to do such penance as Master Arundel should enjoin, did command him to be forthwith removed unto the Tower, and there holden in surely until the day of his trial."

A long silence followed the close of the brief sad story. All knew too well what it portended. At last Lord Cobham had indeed fallen into the lion's clutches, and small hope remained that he would be allowed to escape therefrom. The long-threatening thunder-cloud had broken over them at length. The bolt which struck the head of the household, struck to its heart as well.

Lady Cobham was the first to move. Drawing her veil round her face, she arose from her seat. "I must e'en be alone awhile," she said brokenly. "I will fast and pray this even for my lord, if perchance he may yet escape. Pray ye all for him likewise, whether ye be Catholic or Lollard. Mayhap the one or the other shall receive answer."

Low sobs breaking from her, as she passed down th

hall, seemed to determine the manner in which the mournful news should be received by the household : and a burst of weeping followed, in which not women alone joined. Alfgar suddenly stood up, breathing heavily, and with a strange grey pallor over his face—yet a light shone in his eyes, and he spoke in tones so clear as to be heard all down the hall—

“ Our lady seggeth words of sooth. Verily nought remaineth to us now, save to pray for our dear lord, that God may avert from him this peril. ‘Tis not *perchance* only, but of a surety and without doubt, our prayers shall receive an answer—though in what wise God alone doth know.”

“ Think’st thou, Sir Squire, the serpent will relax his hold, now he hath the victim within his grasp?” asked one present.

Alfgar did not seem to hear the question. A dim unseeing look came into his eyes, and he put out his hand half-gropingly, with a slight stagger.

“ Gytha, I am weary ; I would fain rest me elsewhere awhile—with thee alone—” he said faintly.

She put her arm through his, to guide his failing footsteps, and he would accept of no other aid. A small cell-like chamber, at the end of the first passage which they entered, containing one bench and a rough low bedstead, happened to be unoccupied, and Gytha led him in thither, as the nearest quiet spot which was attainable. Thomas Brooke followed them, bearing a lighted wax-candle, which he stuck upon the spike near the wall, used for the purpose.

“ Can I aid ye in any wise, Madame Gytha?” asked the boy submissively.

“ Ay—hither, lad,” Alfgar answered for her ; and for a few minutes Thomas was hard at work over the fastenings.

of the squire's armour. Alfgar stood leaning against the wall, with a hand on Gytha's shoulder for support, submitting to, rather than assisting in, the operation. Once there was a sharp catch as of acute pain in his quick laboured breathing ; and Thomas said apologetically—

“ I fear me I am somewhat clumsy, Master Cheyne.”

“ Tis nought. Thou art doing right well.”

“ What aileth thee, Alfgar ? ” asked Gytha anxiously.

He did not seem to have heard the question, for no answer came. A minute or two later the last piece of armour was removed, and with a word of brief dismissal to the page, Alfgar staggered rather than walked across the chamber, and threw himself down on the bed. Gytha came to his side, and inquired—

“ What may I do for thee ? ”

“ Nought, save to let none but thee approach me.”

She shut the door in obedience, and then stood looking upon him uneasily. He lay with half-closed eyes, and with no sign of rest or sleep about the tightly contracted brow and lips, while the hard hurried breathing never slackened. Now and then he muttered, “ Water,” and drank eagerly when she brought it to him. Once she tried to cheer him with a hopeful word about Lord Cobham, and her trust even now in the friendship and kindness of the king. But the white worn face quivered all over like a girl's, and a hopeless sob answered her.

“ Mine Alfgar, what didst thou say awhile since ? Where be thy faith ? ” she asked half-reproachfully, bending over him. “ Verily is there One of mightier power than prelate or priest.”

“ I wot it well, Gytha ; but mayhap 'tis for God His glory, that our dear lord should die thus,” murmured Alfgar. “ Oh, would I might even die with him—mine own dear lord and father ! ”

"Alfgar, wilt thou remain here awhile, sith there is nought else thou can'st do for him?"

"Nay, I will away to London on the morrow, and keep close watch. If I may not be with him in his prison, I will even watch without."

"If our lady do consent," said Gytha reluctantly, dreading possible danger for him.

And then she suddenly exclaimed, "Alfgar, what meaneth this?" For a rent in his doublet, and a dark red stain upon its torn edge, attracted her attention.

Alfgar put away her hand, and spoke rather shortly: "Thou need'st not to look terror-struck. 'Twas a prick of a sword, when I did fight my way to *his* side. Me-thinks they kenned not, and meant not for to harm me. I did scarce know it myself till after."

Every lady in those days was an adept in the art of doctoring and binding wounds. "Thou wilt show it unto me," Gytha said, with as much professional confidence as any young M.D. of the nineteenth century. "Prick or no prick, I will not have thee neglect it."

"It needeth nought. I am weary, and do but require rest."

For awhile his will proved the stronger, and Gytha submitted. She brought him a potion of some cooling herbs and persuaded him to drink it; but her remedy was given somewhat late in the day. One and another of the household came to the door, to make inquiry concerning the young squire: He would let her give no other answer than that he was sorely weary, which was true enough so far as it went.

What to do Gytha did not know. She was becoming seriously alarmed, for the first cold faintness was giving place to burning heat of brow and hands, and he had begun to toss to and fro, and mutter feverishly to himself. Yet he resolutely resisted all attempts to examine the

“sword-prick,” as he termed it; and any proposal to fetch somebody else to his side was met with a growing anger which made her question whether he were quite himself.

It was getting late, and most of the household must by this time have retired to bed. Gytha, in utter perplexity, opened the door, meaning at all risks to summon help; but Alfgar sternly forbade her to do so. She hesitated a moment, and he started up to a sitting posture, speaking so loudly and angrily that the poor girl instantly obeyed, and came trembling to his side. But just at that moment there was another step and another voice outside.

“Gytha, I desire to enter.”

Alfgar sprang suddenly to his feet. “‘Tis our lady; poor dame—poor dame! Gytha, delay not!” and he stamped his foot impatiently. “Open to her speedily.”

Gytha was thankful enough to obey. Lady Cobham swept in, with her tear-stained face and rustling robes. “Gytha, what are ye after here? Folks are sorely perplexed—” she began in a half-displeased tone, but she broke off suddenly. Alfgar was standing opposite, leaning against the wall, with a strange look in his eyes, and his breath coming in painful gasps. “What hath happed unto him? Gytha—Alfgar!”

Alfgar staggered a step forwards, and then fell back in a deep swoon upon the bed. Gytha could hardly speak, but she pointed to the rent doublet; and Lady Cobham’s own hands began hurriedly removing such of his dress as was necessary for due examination. Gytha’s trembling fingers assisted to the best of their ability, but the last hour had almost done away with her power of self-command.

A sword-prick! The two looked up fearfully at one another, when the deep inflamed side-wound, roughly bandaged by himself, was laid bare. Gytha grew whiter

and whiter, till her face rivalled even the deathly pallor of her brother's.

"And he hath ridden the long day, with this upon him," said Lady Cobham sorrowfully. "I would give a thousand marks it had not been."

"Madame—think'st thou—" Gytha tried to ask, but she could hardly form the words, and only looked beechingly.

Lady Cobham shook her head, while beginning carefully to examine and dress the wound. The old attendant, who had come with her, quickly fetched what was necessary, being well accustomed to assist her lady in such matters.

"I wis not, Gytha. 'Tis hard to tell. An the blade hath not pierced so deep as I do dread, mayhap he will rally speedily. But I fear me sorely—sorely—"

Giving full attention to her work, she did not speak for a time. The swoon lasted long—lasted till the dressing of the wound was accomplished, and till Alfgar himself was laid in the bed. And when at length he opened his eyes, the wandering glance and incoherent mutterings told that reason for a time was gone.

"What saith he, Gytha?" asked Lady Cobham, trying in vain to catch the sense of his words.

"Madame, 'tis all of going to London on the morrow. He hath set his heart on watching ever near without the prison, since he may not be within."

Gytha spoke calmly, with a patient look upon her sweet pale face. She was setting herself resolutely to wait and watch, and not to look forward.

"Wherefore doubtless he did conceal his wound—poor lad! Ah me! he hath a noble lord, and his lord hath a faithful squire; but 'twill be long e'er knight and squire do meet again!" and Lady Cobham sighed heavily.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE TRIAL.

THE twenty-third of September came, and at the appointed hour Archbishop Arundel, with Clifford, Bishop of London, and Bolingbroke, Bishop of Winchester, sat together in the chapter-house of St. Paul's, awaiting the advent of the prisoner. Nor had they, as before, to wait in vain. Lord Cobham was brought and left before them, by Sir Robert Morley, Lieutenant of the Tower. A brief examination took place, during which Sir John produced a short written exposition of his belief on certain leading points of controversy. He calmly refused to make answer, or in any way to declare his mind, further than appeared in his writing. The examiners in some perplexity deferred his full trial until the Monday following, promising meanwhile to send him a brief exposition of the Romish belief, in answer to his paper.

On Monday, the twenty-fifth of September, the bishops again met—not this time at St. Paul's, but within the convent of the Dominican friars of Ludgate. Bishops, priests, monks, canons, friars, doctors, and spectators, were gathered together *en masse*, for the hearing of a case which excited great and widespread interest.

Among the spectators, and keeping a somewhat sheltered position, might have been seen Sir Roger Acton,

with his bonnet pulled low over his brow. He was watching intently for the appearance of the prisoner, when a light touch on his arm made him turn his head. A sallow-complexioned, sickly-looking man, of middle age and unmistakably gentle blood, stood by him in the throng.

"What will ye with me?" asked Sir Roger Acton.

Something of suppressed agitation was struggling in the other's emaciated features. "Can ye tell me aught of *him* ere he come? Have ye seen him in his imprisonment?"

"Certes, not I!" responded Sir Roger, scrutinizing closely the stranger's face. "Friend, I wot not who ye may be; yet methinks I have met ye, or one like unto ye afore."

"Take heed; 'tis no place for the mention of names," was the guarded answer. "I do ken thee right well, and thou and I are of a mind concerning *him* and his doctrine."

An assertion not sufficient to set Sir Roger at his ease, but he answered without any appearance of caution—

"What desirest thou I should tell thee?"

"Hath he been ere now examined; or cometh he now for the first time before his accusers?"

"'Twas but a brief and privy examination, some few days gone. Sir John did present his belief upon paper, 'tis said, and would in no wise answer aught, save that which he had written. Thereupon they did send him back into the Tower, and commanded him to be ready on this day, for to answer all such questions as should be demanded of him. Where hast thou been, friend, that thou knowest nought of that concerning which all men do make talk?"

"Elsewhere," was the brief response. "I did but yestere'en reach London city—little dreaming of the tidings which should meet me."

"Tidings concerning—" began Sir Roger in a questioning tone.

"One dear unto me as mine own life."

Again Sir Roger gazed scrutinizingly, but failed to recognise an acquaintance. "Of whom speakest thou?" he asked low and cautiously.

A gesture towards the door answered him. For at that moment Lord Cobham was escorted into the presence of his judges by Sir Robert Morley, who himself immediately retired. Calm and fearless, with his noble face and knightly bearing, Sir John stood alone amongst his persecutors, awaiting their pleasure. The silence was broken by Archbishop Arundel.

"Lord Cobham, ye be avised, I am assured, of the words and process which we had unto you on Saturday last past, in the chapter-house of St. Paul's, which process were now too long to be rehearsed again. I said unto you then that ye were accused for your contumacy and disobedience to Holy Church, thinking that ye should therewith have desired with meekness your absolution."

He hardly looked for the prompt and cheerful answer — "God saith by his holy prophet, '*Maledicam benedictionibus vestris*,' which is as much as to say: 'I shall curse whereas you bless.'

The archbishop preferred to ignore this slight interruption, and went on as if he had not heard: "Sir, at that time I gently proffered to have assoiled you, if ye would have asked it. And yet I do the same, if ye will humbly desire it in due form and manner, as Holy Church hath ordained."

"Nay, forsooth, will I not!" was the resolute answer; "for I never yet trespassed against you, and therefore I will not do it, seeing I need not your absolution."

And then, with the impulsive simplicity of the manners of the time, Lord Cobham knelt suddenly down upon the pavement of the court, raising his clasped hands to heaven, with words of solemn confession :—

“ I shrieve me here unto Thee, my Eternal Living God, that in my frail youth I offended Thee, Lord, most grievously in pride, wrath, gluttony, and covetousness. Many men have I hurt in mine anger, and done many horrible sins. Good Lord, I ask thee mercy.”

And as the bench of judges sat listening in bewilderment to this unexpected outburst of feeling, Lord Cobham rose to his feet, with tears in his eyes, and cried in strong clear tones, which rang to the farthest verge of the assembly—

“ Lo ! good people, lo ! for the breaking of God’s law and his great commandments they never yet cursed me. But for their own laws and traditions most cruelly do they handle both me and other men. And therefore both they and their laws, by the promise of God, shall utterly be destroyed.”

The force of his words, and the striking dignity of his bearing, caused no small sensation amongst all present. The archbishop, anxious to allay the confusion, attempted a somewhat lame apology for the treatment to which Sir John had been subjected. Then turning to him, he suddenly demanded an answer to the paper which he and his suffragans had sent to the Tower.

Lord Cobham quietly declined having anything to do with the said bill, but did not refuse to explain his own views on the subject of the sacrament. He was closely questioned, and distinctly set forth the belief he held, that Christ’s body was verily present at the Supper, only under the form of bread. But this caused exceeding anger and excitement, and many indignantly desired him

o say whether or no it were material bread after the consecration.

Lord Cobham looked earnestly at the archbishop, putting aside, as it were, his other questioners, and simply said—

“I believe surely that it is Christ’s Body in the form of bread. Sir, believe not you this?”

“Yea, marry do I,” answered Arundel.

Then the doctors pressed the question upon Sir John, whether after consecration it were *only* Christ’s Body, and no bread. He replied that it was both; adding—

“The bread is the thing that we see with our eyes; the body of Christ is there-under hid, and not seen but in faith.”

The judges exchanged glances and half-smiles, not dissatisfied that the people should see him caught in open heresy; and said—

“‘Tis a foul heresy.”

But Sir John, quietly unheeding them, awaited further examination. Again the bishops and doctors pressed him closely on this question of the bread after consecration. But Lord Cobham, if not entirely free from the meshes of old errors, was clear and uncompromising so far as his knowledge went, and made point-blank answer—

“St. Paul the Apostle was, I am sure, as wise as ye be now, and more godly-learned. Yet he did call it bread, writing to the Corinthians. Lo, he calleth it bread, and not Christ’s Body, but a means whereby we do receive Christ’s Body.”

“Paul must be otherwise understood,” was the confused answer to this keen thrust. “For it is surely an heresy to say that it is bread after the consecration; but only Christ’s Body.”

"How make ye that good?" asked Sir John.

"For it is against the determination of Holy Church," was the only argument they could bring forward.

"Sir John," added the archbishop, "we did send unto you a writing concerning the faith of this blessed sacrament, clearly determined by the Church of Rome, our Mother, and by the holy doctors."

"I do know of none more holy than Christ and His Apostles," responded Lord Cobham. "And as for that determination, I wot 'tis none of *theirs*, for it standeth not with the Scriptures, but manifestly against them. If it be the Church's, as ye do say it is, it hath been hers only since she did receive the great poison of worldly possessions, and not afore."

"Believest thou not, Sir John, in the determination of Holy Church?" asked more than one.

"No, forsooth; for it is no God," was the uncompromising reply. "In all our creed is IN but thrice mentioned concerning belief: IN God the Father, IN God the Son, IN God the Holy Ghost."

He enlarged slightly upon this thought.

"Tush!" interposed one of the lawyers contemptuously. "That was but a word of office. But what is your belief concerning Holy Church?"

"My belief," Lord Cobham answered, "is, as I did say afore, that all the Scriptures be true. All that is grounded upon them I do thoroughly believe. But in your lordly laws and idle determinations have I no belief whatsoever; for ye be no part of Christ's Holy Church, as your open deeds do show; but ye are very antichrists, obstinately set against His holy law and will."

Great excitement again arose among his hearers, and his words were afresh condemned as strongly heretical. The archbishop, to draw him out further, then requested

a definition of “Holy Church,” according to his own notions.

“My belief is, that Holy Church is the number of them which shall be saved, of whom Christ is the Head,” said Sir John unhesitatingly. “Of the Church, one part is even now in heaven with Christ our Lord; another part, ye do say,—and he spoke doubtfully—‘in purgatory; and the third part here upon earth. This latter part standeth in three degrees: in knighthood, priesthood, and the commonalty, as I did plainly say afore in the confession of my belief.”

“Can ye tell me who is of this Church?” inquired the wily archbishop.

“Yea, truly, that I can.”

The prior of the Carmelites brought forward a quotation: “*Nolite judicare.*” If ye here be forbidden the judgment of your neighbour or brother, how much more the judgment of your superior!”

Sir John, in return, quoted from the same chapter concerning a tree being known by its fruits, with three or four other texts, in quick succession; and warm discussion followed, hot and strong terms of reproach being flung from one to the other. But not one inch of ground could priests and friars, clerks and doctors, gain upon that one brave man standing there amongst them—alone and in their power, yet free with Christ’s own glorious freedom.

“Ye do stop up the way into the kingdom of heaven with your own traditions, and therefore are ye the household of antichrist,” he said fearlessly in the course of argument. “Ye will not permit God’s verity to have passage, nor yet to be taught of His true ministers, fearing lest ye should have your wickedness to be reproved. By such vain flatterers as uphold ye in your mischiefs,

ye do suffer the common people most miserably to be seduced."

"By our lady, sir," interposed the archbishop hotly, "there shall no such preach within my diocese, an God will, neither yet in my jurisdiction, if I may know it, as either maketh division, or yet dissension among the poor commons."

"Both Christ and His Apostles were accused of sedition-making, yet were they peaceable men," Lord Cobham answered to this.

Then a few minutes later, finding they could do nothing with him, Master John Kempe, a certain doctor of law, pulled a written paper from his dress. It was a copy of the bill or belief sent to Lord Cobham in the Tower.

"My Lord Cobham," said the doctor persuasively, coming to the assistance of his discomfited colleagues—"we must briefly know your mind concerning these four points here following." He read aloud the first on the subject of the sacrament, adding—"Sir, believe ye not this?"

"This is not my belief," replied Sir John quietly. "But my faith is, as I did say unto ye afore, that in the worshipful sacrament of the altar is very Christ's body in form of bread."

The archbishop frowned.

"Sir John, ye must say otherwise."

"Nay, that shall I not, if God be upon my side, as I trust He be," said Sir John.

"The second point is this," pursued Master Kempe. "Holy Church hath determined that every Christian man, living here bodily upon earth, ought to be shriven to a priest ordained by the Church, if he may come to him. Sir, what say ye to this?"

Lord Cobham was at no loss for an answer.

"A diseased and sore wounded man had need to have a sure wise surgeon and a true, knowing both the ground and the danger of the same. Most necessary were it therefore to be first shiven unto God, who only doth know our diseases and can help us. I deny not in this the going to a priest, if he be a man of good life and godly learned. But if he be a man of vicious living, or an idiot, that is my curate, I ought rather to flee from him than to seek unto him ; for sooner might I catch ill of him that is nought, than any good towards my soul's health."

They attempted no answer, and the doctor simply read aloud the third point, on the subject of Peter; asking again, "Sir, believe ye not this?"

"He that followeth Peter most nighest in pure living, is next unto him in succession," said Sir John Oldcastle. "But your lordly order esteemeth not greatly the lowly behaviour of poor Peter, whatsoever ye do prate of him. Neither care ye greatly for the humble manners of them which succeeded him, until the time of Sylvester, which for the most part were martyrs. All the world knoweth this well enough by you, and yet ye can make boast of Peter."

"Then what say ye unto the Pope?" asked a doctor.

"As I did say afore," Lord Cobham answered ; "he and you together do make whole the great Antichrist. Never will I in conscience obey any among you all, till I do see you even with Peter following Christ in your conversation."

The fourth point was then read aloud, on the subject of pilgrimages, relics, and images.

"Sir, what say ye to this?" asked the persevering doctor.

"That I do soothly owe unto them no service by any

commandment of God, and therefore I mind not to seek them for your covetousness. It were best ye swept your relics and images fair from cobwebs and dust, and so laid them up safe for* catching of scath ; or else to bury them fair in the ground, as ye do other aged people which are God's images. 'Tis a right marvellous thing that saints, now being dead, should become so covetous and greedy, and thereupon so bitterly beg, which all their lifetime hated all covetousness and begging. But this I do say unto you, and I would all the world should mark it, that with your shrines and idols, your feigned absolutions and pardons, ye do draw unto you the substance, wealth, and chief pleasures of all Christian realms."

"Why, sir," said one of the clerks, sitting by, "will ye not worship good images?"

"What worship should I give unto them?" inquired Sir John.

"Sir; ye will of a surety worship the cross of Christ that He did die upon," said the friar Palmer.

"Where is it?" asked Lord Cobham.

"I put ye the case, sir, thatt it were here even now before ye."

"This is a great wise man," was the dry answer, "to put unto me an earnest question of a thing, and yet he knoweth not where the thing'self is. Yet once again ask I you, What worship should I do unto it?"

"Such worship as St. Paul doth speak of," said one of the clerks ; and he quoted the oft-used verse from the sixth of Galatians, in support of his view.

Lord Cobham extended his two arms to their full width. "This is a very cross," he said, gravely smiling—"yea, and so much a better one than your cross of wood, in that

* Safe from.

† As if.

it was created of God. Yet will I not seek to have it worshipped."

The Bishop of London spoke in his turn, after keeping long silence. "Sir, ye wot well that Christ did die upon the material cross."

"Yea," Lord Cobham answered, "and I wot also that our salvation came *not* in by that material cross, but alone by Him who did die thereupon. And well do I wot that holy St. Paul rejoiced in none other cross, but in Christ's passion and death only, and in his own sufferings of like persecution with Him, for the self-same verity that He had suffered for afore."

"Will ye then do none honour to the holy cross?" asked another clerk.

"Yea, soothly; an he were mine, I would lay him up honestly, and see unto him that he should take no more scathes abroad, nor be robbed of his goods as he is now-a-days," replied Lord Cobham.

"Sir John," said the archbishop, growing weary of the long and fruitless disputation—"Ye have spoken here many wondrous words to the slanderous rebuke of all the whole spirituality, giving a great ill example unto the common sort here, for to have us in the more disdain. Much time have we spent here about you, and all in vain, it mesemeth. We must now be at short point with ye, for the day passeth. Ye must either submit yourself unto the ordinance of Holy Church, or throw yourself—no remedy!—into most deep peril! See to it in time; for anon it will be else too late."

"I know not to what purpose I should otherwise submit me," said Lord Cobham, immovable still. "Much more have ye offended me, than ever I did offend you, in thus troubling me afore this multitude."

"We once again do require thee to bethink thee well,"

said the archbishop slowly and emphatically ; “ and to hold none other opinion in these matters than the universal faith of the holy Church of Rome ; and so, like an obedient child, to return unto the unity of thy mother. See to it, I say, in time, for yet ye may have remedy ; whereas anon it will soothly be too late.”

But the fearless answer came again ; “ I will none otherwise believe in these points, than as I have told ye heretofore. Do with me what ye will !”

A moment’s pause, and then Arundel spoke conclusively—

“ Well ; I see none other but we must needs do the law. We must proceed forthwith to the sentence definitive, and both judge ye and condemn ye for an heretic.”

CHAPTER XIX.

CONDEMNED.

SEEMINGLY the sentence of condemnation had been ready prepared beforehand. The archbishop stood up, and while clergy and laity respectfully doffed their bonnets, he proceeded to read aloud the Latin bills, the sense of which was of course unintelligible to a large part of his audience.

"In the Name of God. So be it. We, Thomas, by the sufferance of God Archbishop of Canterbury, metropolitan and primate of all England, and legate from the apostolic see of Rome, will this to be known unto all men. In a certain cause of heresy, and upon divers articles, whereupon, Sir John Oldcastle, knight, and Lord Cobham, after a diligent inquisition made for the same, was detected, accused, and presented before us in our last convocation of all our whole clergy of our province at Canterbury—"

Thus the first bill began. The fatherly compassion and disinterested kindness of Lord Cobham's judges were extolled, in contrast with his own stiff-necked perversity. Something in the same style began the second bill, calling Christ to witness that His glory alone was sought in this enterprise. Thereafter followed strong condemnation of Sir John as "an evident heretic in his own person, a mighty maintainer of other heretics, a child of iniquity and darkness;" and then—

"We, sententially and definitively by this present writing judge, declare, and condemn the said Sir John Oldcastle, knight, and Lord Cobham, for a most pernicious detestable heretic, convicted upon the same, and refusing utterly to obey the Church again, committing him here from henceforth as a condemned heretic, to the secular jurisdiction, power, and judgment, TO DO HIM THEREUPON TO DEATH. Furthermore we excommunicate, and denounce accursed, not only this heretic here present, but so many else besides as shall hereafter in favour of his error either receive or defend him, counsel him or help him, or any other way maintain him, as very fautors, receivers, defenders, counsellors, aiders, and maintainers of condemned heretics."

A lengthy command that this sentence should be made known throughout the diocese of every bishop present concluded the bill. And then the archbishop looked up at the prisoner standing before him, and men waited, listening breathlessly. Now, if ever, surely the knight's calm courage might fail him !

But his face was bright almost to smiling, and no shadow of the solemn words, "to do him thereupon to death !" was visible on that broad fearless brow. Clearly and unfalteringly spoke the condemned heretic, in his strong firm tones—

"Though ye do judge my body, which is but a wretched thing, yet am I certain and sure that ye can soothly do no harm unto my soul, no more than could Satan upon the soul of Job. He that created that will, of His infinite mercy and promise, save it ; I have therein no doubt. And as concerning these articles before rehearsed, I will stand to them even unto the very death, by the grace of my eternal God."

Then turning round, with earnestly uplifted hands, Lord Cobham cried emphatically—

“Good Christian people, for the love of God, be ye well ware of these men, for they will else beguile you, and lead you blindlings into hell with themselves. For Christ saith plainly unto ye—‘Sothely ghif a blynd man ghewe ledyng to a blynd man, bothe fallen down in to the diche !’”

And still with uplifted hands Sir John knelt suddenly upon the ground before the concourse, and prayed fervently, looking up towards heaven—

“Lord God Eternal, I beseech Thee, for Thy great mercy’s sake, to forgive my pursuers, if it be Thy blessed will.”

After which, without delay, he was delivered into the hands of Sir Robert Morley to be reconducted to the Tower, and speedily disappeared from the eyes of all present. “And thus,” adds the old chronicler, “there was an end of that day’s work !”

Sir Roger Acton turned suddenly round to the stranger knight, who had remained silently beside him throughout the trial :

“Sir, what think ye of these proceedings ?”

“Sir Roger, I do think thoughts, the which, if known, might speedily bring me into a like condemnation.”

The words, and especially the name, were breathed rather than spoken. “Thou wittest me, verily, yet I ken not who thou may’st be,” said Sir Roger, gazing at him steadily. “Fair sir, will ye come elsewhere with me ?”

The offer was accepted courteously. Sir Roger pulled his bonnet lower over his brows, and began to make his way out of the throng. A stirred and moved and sorrowful and indignant throng it was, burning with grief and anger for the brave confessor whose words had struck so powerfully to his hearers’ hearts. Many thousands in the city, who lacked courage to come openly forward as followers of Wickliffe, yet held strongly his views con-

cerning the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Personally also Sir John was widely known and deeply esteemed. The bishop and priests were in bad odour that day, and for many days afterwards, alike among the nobility and the common people.

"Sir John Oldcastle is no stranger unto thee, me seemeth," remarked Sir Roger, when he and his companion had gained a quiet street.

"Stranger unto me!" The knight smiled, though sorrowfully. "Mine own sworn and most dear brother-at-arms!"

"Ha!" and the truth flashed into the other's mind. "I do ken thee now right well. Sir William Cheyne, in sober verity!"

"Soothly, in sober verity. Wherefore nay, Sir Roger?"

"How comest thou hither at a moment like to this?"

"So it did hap. I have these years past suffered sorely in my body from strange sickness and weakness, till that a certain wise woman of late did give unto me a marvellous decoction which hath restored unto me my lost strength. Were I Catholic, Sir Roger, I might e'en deem the same a miracle. Little Gytha hath writ unto us, albeit in cautious wise, concerning the likelihood of peril unto Sir John. So soon as I might mount my charger and accomplish the wearisome journey, I did travel hitherward, for to take command as of old under the banner of my Lord Cobham. Alack! little dreamed I of the sore spectacle, which did await me here!"

Sir William sighed deeply, and drew his hand across his brow.

"Think'st thou, Sir Roger, they will dare for to wreak their vengeance upon him—upon such as him?"

"I know not that which these prelates will not dare!" said Sir Roger, in a stifled voice. "Perchance—perchance some road of escape shall yet lie open unto him."

"The king—."

"Nay, I do place small reliance upon him."

"He loveth Sir John."

"Sir John hath oft and sorely displeased him of late."

They walked on gloomily, side by side, for a little distance, feeling each his utter inability to assist his friend.

"I do marvel somewhat that mine eyes did nowhere behold Lord Cobham his favourite esquire," said Sir William suddenly.

"Master Alfgar, the grey-eyed comely youth ! Thine een played thee not false. Hast not heard concerning him?"

"Heard aught of ill?" asked Sir William.

"He lieth at the point to die."

Sir William reeled back a pace, horror-struck. For the moment, in the midst of sad thoughts, Sir Roger Acton had really forgotten the relationship.

"I pryythee pardon, good friend, pardon," he said hastily, laying his hand on Sir William's arm. "It had even escaped my mind that thou and he were father and son, else had I not told thee thus roughly. Mayhap 'twill be other than I say. Mayhap he will speedily recover."

"What aileth him?" asked Sir William huskily.

"'Twas the day of Lord Cobham his arrest. Master Cheyne did run frantically forward, and for all the men-at-arms might do, will they nil they, he did rush unto the feet of Sir John for to crave his blessing. Methinks 'twas a heart-break unto the lad, and that he dieth not of the wound alone ; nay, I say not dieth, for verily he may get him well."

"The wound," muttered the unhappy father, gazing blankly with dim eyes upon the flowing river which they were now approaching.

"He ever maintaineth that 'twas but a slip—a sword-

point entering of his gown and doublet ; for nought of armour had he on that day. But 'twas a prick that did pierce deeply. Perchance it had been less, but he did carelessly bind it himself, and letted no man to wete of that which had come to pass ; and the next day he did ride hard and fast, for to reach Coulyng Castle, heeding never the anguish, which since he hath not denied, and meaning for to return speedily unto London, to be near unto his lord. But a swoon that night did let them become acquaint with all, and fierce fever did thereupon set in upon the wound."

" Ay, and after—?" questioned Sir William.

" Nay I ken little beside, save that he ever raveth mournfully concerning Sir John and the Damoiselle Margaret de Cobham, who did bravely come forth for to make her confession awhile since. And a billet brought unto me yestere'en from the Lady Cobham did speak of him as soothly nigh to death."

They stood looking at the river—Sir William Cheyne, with his haggard face bent low, as he thought of his son's bright youthful promise, thus to be cut off for ever ! A sword prick—only a prick ; but how much of sorrow and desolation it might work !

Sir Roger Acton's musings had wandered from sympathy with his companion to the engrossing subject of Lord Cobham, and the dangers of the Lollard party generally. He came back all at once to the former point, and asked—

" Wilt thou journey unto Coulyng Castle, Sir William?"

" I would it were possible to do so this even," answered Sir William.

" Nay ; but on the morrow thou may'st. I would counsel thee to go ; for to see thy son and his gentle sister. I did purpose to journey thither myself, for to break unto Lady Cobham the tidings of her lord, and for to hold

parley with her. But methinks I will delay now a while for to watch the course which events shall take, and will e'en leave unto thee to carry the tidings. What say'st thou?"

"An thou wilt," Sir William answered sadly. "'Tis a heavy burden to bear, and mayhap a heavy burden to receive on my coming thither."

"Nay, nay; perchance thou wilt find the lad greatly revived. I do trust it may soothly be even so. Ha! here cometh my friend Sir John Beverley. I did look to meet him on this spot. Thou art acquaint with him?"

Sir John Beverley was quicker to recognise the long-absent knight than Sir Roger had been.

"Welcome unto London, Sir William; thrice welcome, for that the presence of such as thou be grievously needed now. I wist not that thou wert again in these parts."

"'Twas but yestere'en that I did reach the city. Truly they be bitter tidings which did await me."

"Ay—concerning Lord Cobham."

"And mine own son."

"Thine! Alfgar Cheyne, would'st thou say? Verily I had forgot. How goeth it with the lad?"

Sir Roger Acton shook his head. "Ill—sorely ill, I do greatly fear. Sir John—" he paused and looked cautiously round, but no man was within ear-shot—"methinks the time draweth near when faithful Lollards will need for to rise and to do, else shall the light of truth be altogether and speedily extinguished in this realm."

"Methinks each Lollard doth already do, in the patient enduring of sore affliction," said Sir William. "I wot not what can he more?"

"There be times when resistance becometh even a duty," said Sir Roger, feeling his way cautiously.

"Resistance unto them whom God hath set over us?"

"Mayhap even so. Dost thou deem it may not be?"

"Verily I do deem the resistance of meek endurance that which our Lord Christ and His apostles did most enjoin; ay, and which Master Wickliffe did ever teach," answered Sir William, fresh from the school of long and wearing sickness. "Mayhap I did once deem somewhat otherwise. But Sir John Oldcastle—he agreeth not therein with thee."

"I wis not—I wis not," said Sir Roger hastily, exchanging a glance with Sir John Beverley. "He speaketh in tones of caution; yet methinks, an he were now free—"

"The which is he not. Be thou well ware, Sir Roger, that thou leadest not our friend into worse conditions than he even now doth find himself in," Sir William said warningly.

"I scarce see how matters might be worse with him," said Sir Roger, not entirely pleased.

"I do hope much from the king his clemency. But an ye do anger him afresh—"

"Nay, nay; thou may'st be easy on that head, of a surety," said Sir Roger with a laugh that had little mirth in it. "Verily while Sir John lieth beneath the lion's claw, his friends will scarce anger of him further by tweaking of his tail."

"And if he be forgiven, and the king do relent and show him mercy, verily the said tweaking would no less be fraught with dire and certain peril."

"Thou wert ever a wise and right thoughtful man," Sir Roger answered, sheering off from the point in question. "What hour wilt thou start on the morrow, Sir William? Ere prime?"

"Ay, that will I? Ere dawn do break, an I may but see a lance length from my horse his head."

CHAPTER XX.

SICKNESS.

“SIR WILLIAM CHEYNE ! Thou art soothly dreaming, wench !”

“Verily, madame, they did desire me to deliver unto ye the tidings that Sir William Cheyne did await your pleasure in the hall.”

“Sir William Cheyne !” repeated Lady Cobham in amazement. “Methought he had taken unto a bed of sickness, from the which he might never rise again. Sir William Cheyne !”

She sat for a moment, like one lost—then suddenly started up.

“Perchance he bringeth tidings of my lord. Whence cometh he, say’st thou ?”

“My lady, I ken not.”

“Thou wittest never nought. Stand back, and I will e’en go ask for mine own self.”

Wondering still if the chambrière’s news could be true, and if some mistake had not occurred, Lady Cobham quitted her chamber, where she had been taking an hour’s rest, and made her way down into the great hall. A knight, standing on the dais, came silently to meet her with courteous greeting. Strong emotions were struggling in his haggard and changed features, yet she recognised him immediately, though only once and for a brief space had she ever met him before.

"Sir William! 'Tis thou in truth. Dear unto my Lord John art thou, and thrice welcome for his sake. Hast heard aught of my lord, Sir William?"

He hardly knew how to tell the truth, and dared not break it too hurriedly; yet the father's heart was aching for news of one who stood yet nearer to himself.

"Madame, I come from London even now," he said.

"And thou hast heard—thou wittest! How goeth it with Lord Cobham?"

"The examining of him did take place yesterday. I was myself present at the same."

"Thou! Thou wert present! Sir William, oh, I beseech thee, tell me what did hap unto him."

"Madame, he did bravely and wisely answer to all the questions which they did put unto him. In no wise could they put him to silence, neither shame him before the multitude. Verily did he the rather shame them. But—"

"How ended they? Shall he be speedily freed to return unto me again?"

She asked the question falteringly, and a dimness came over her beautiful upraised eyes.

"Madame, he hath friends many! Even yet, perchance, somewhat may be done."

Lady Cobham passed her hand over her eyes, and lifted her head which she had bent despairingly.

"I wis the worst. But thou must tell it to me. Brave hath he been, and brave for his sake will I be—ay, and for thee also, for I have tidings in store which will rend thine heart. Tell unto me the truth, and strive not to make it less. He hath been condemned even to die."

Sir William bent his head in mournful assent; and she wrung her hands passionately together.

"O my lord—my Lord John! mine heart will break. O God! may nought be done?"

Weeping bitterly, she hid her face in her mantle, but presently again looked up, struggling for composure ;—

“ I will question thee more anon. Sir William, thou mayest not delay. I have sore tidings to tell thee.”

“ Alfgar !” the knight’s parched lips strove to say.

“ ‘Tis Alfgar of whom I do speak. Wittest thou aught ?”

“ Madame would’st thou—would’st thou tell me, he dieth—hath died ?”

“ He liveth yet, but he lieth at the point to die. An thou would’st see him, thou must hasten ; nay, rush not away, thou wittest not whither. I will mine own self lead thee. Hast heard the doleful tale ?”

Sir William was past speaking at the moment. He pressed after her impatiently, till they reached the little turret-chamber where Alfgar had lain from the first. Lady Cobham went in ; the knight following with his heavy tread, and heavy heart likewise.

Only the brother and sister were in the room, with an old female retainer standing and watching at a little distance. Alfgar was raised upon pillows, to help the laboured breathing, which came and went in fitful gasps, each seeming as if it must be the last. The sunken wasted face, deadly white and calm, with the eyes nearly closed, and the bright hair pushed carelessly back from the temples, lay helplessly on Gytha’s arm as she knelt by his side. Death verily seemed written on every feature. And almost like a shadow of that dying face—so colourless and sweet and still—was the face that bent tenderly over him.

“ Gytha——”

Lady Cobham’s voice seemed unheard. Not so when a deeper tone said huskily behind—

“ Gytha—little maiden !”

“ Father !”

She lifted her eyes with the startled look of one waking from sleep, and for a moment her pale cheeks flushed

crimson. “Father! O Alfgar! see’st thou? our father hath come!”

A little quiver of the eyelids answered the appeal, but Alfgar seemed too far gone for speech. Sir William came nearer, and with a full heart laid his hand on Gytha’s head; then bent down to kiss the damp brow of his dying son.

“Alfgar, knowest thou me not?” he asked mournfully.

The heavy eyes opened partially, and wandered feebly from Gytha to him.

“I can see nought,” muttered Alfgar. “‘Tis all dark. Gytha, what of my lord?”

“I wis nought, sweetheart,” she said tenderly. “Thou hast other matters for to bethink thee of now, mine Alfgar.”

He smiled faintly. “I were in evil case—an I—had left all till now! Mayhap I will speedily meet him above.”

“Thy coming hath roused him marvellously,” whispered Lady Cobham to Sir William. “He hath not spoken thus much for three days gone by.”

“Hast thou no hope?” breathed Sir William.

She shook her head sadly, but suddenly brought a small cup of liquid from the window-seat. “Gytha, we will e’en try him once again. Perchance he may swallow yet.”

It was a struggle, but some few drops went down, seemingly with little benefit. The ghastly look of exhaustion that came over his face made Sir William turn back with a low groan of despair, unable to look upon his son’s death.

Gytha’s sweet voice broke the silence, in clear unfaltering utterance—

“Jesus our Lord saith, ‘I am the dore. If ony man shal entre by me, he shal be saued; and he shall go yn, and shall go out, and he shal fynde lesewis.’

“‘I am a good schepherde; a good schepherde ghyueth his soule for his sheep.’

“ ‘ My scheepe heeren my vois, and I knowe hem, and thei suen me. And I ghyue to hem euerelasting lyf, and thei schulen not perische into withouten ende, and ony man schal not rauysche hem of myn hond.’

“ ‘ In the hous of my Fadir ben many dwellingis ; if any thing lesse, I hadde seid to you, for I go for to make redy to you a place. And if I schal go, and schal make redy to you a place, eftsoone I schal come and I schal take you to my silf, that where I am and ye be.’

“ ‘ Whanne he hade loued hise that weren in the world, in to the ende he louede hem.’ ”

With slight pauses between, verse after verse fell softly from her lips, and a look of happy peacefulness grew upon her brother's face. But another voice broke in here—deep, husky, and tremulous—

“ Lord—lo !—‘ he whom Thou louest is syk,’—is sorely sick. Lord, we do beseech Thee, for Thy name's sake, speak unto Thy servants, saying, ‘ This sicknesse is not to the death, but for the glorie of God, that Goddis Sone be glorified bi it !’ For soothly—soothly—Thou louest us. And ‘ he whom Thou louest is syk ! ’ ”

Alfgar opened his eyes suddenly with a little start, and looked full at Sir William. “ Father !” and a smile lighted up his face—“ 'tis verily thou !”

“ Didst not know me till now, mine Alfgar ?”

“ Hast heard aught—concerning my lord ?” whispered Alfgar.

They dared not even exchange glances. The slightest agitation must instantly have extinguished the flickering spark of life remaining. “ Ay,” Sir William answered, with a steadiness that surprised himself, “ He witnesseth ever fearlessly for Christ. And thou likewise, mine Alfgar—canst thou also witness unto His faithfulness and His love ?”

“ That can I ! He keepeth me in peace, my father.

Albeit I fain would live—yet am I willing for to die, if He doth call me."

Again the heavy eyes closed, and the gasping breaths grew fainter. The old woman came a pace nearer, and muttered, " 'Tis nigh over with him."

" Hist, Bertha, hist !" said Lady Cobham, low and sternly. " He will hear thee."

And they watched by his side—minute after minute, momentarily expecting that the spark must die out and the spirit take its flight. For again and again the breath had almost ceased, and the livid hue of death increased. Yet still he did not die. Minute by minute—till an hour had passed, and yet another hour, and Alfgar was living still. It seemed to Gytha in her intense motionless watch that a more natural hue was slowly replacing the ghastly pallor ; that the eyes were closing more easily ; that the breath was growing more regular. Not daring yet to hope, she looked up, and caught the faintest shadow of a smile on Lady Cobham's sorrowful face.

" Hist ! He sleepeth."

Almost inaudibly the words were breathed forth. And as low, yet more clearly, Sir William pleadingly murmured—

" 'Lord, if he sleepeth, he shal be saf.' "

CHAPTER XXI.

STERBOROUGH CASTLE.

IN the great “spinning-house,” or spinning-room of Sterborough Castle, in the county of Surrey, sat the Lady Alianore, daughter of John Lord Maltravers, and widow of the late Sir Reginald de Cobham, amongst her maidens. Tall, somewhat stout, and decidedly stately, she was not without a measure of half-masculine beauty, though the strongly marked features verged on coarseness, and no trace of feminine sweetness was discernible in the full prominent blue eyes. She was steadily at work herself over her loom, but at the same time she kept jealous watch over her damsels, that there might be no loitering on their part.

“ Isabella de Periton, thou makest scant advance, methinks. Hath aught of ill taken thy wool? Haste thee, wench. I love not to see idling. Cassandra Leigh, art thou art fatigued, thou mayest seek thy couch, but ‘tis here no place for giving of yawns. ‘Tis the consequence of thine overwacche* last night. An it doth hinder thy work on the morrow, thou shalt e’en another banquet-day retire thee early. What say’st thou, Eva de Malmayns?”

A fair-haired timid-looking young girl rose and curtsied deeply, in evident alarm.

“ I will ne have no gossiping in undertones among ye. What didst say?”

* Sitting up late.

"As concerning my lord's pylche* and plomayle,"† faltered Eva de Malmayns. "I did but remark, madame, that yestere'en they were grievously mud-besmeared."

"Get thee on with thy spinning, wench," was the sharp reply to this naïve confession.

Wheels and hands flew busily, interrupted only by the dame's constant interjections of reproof. Presently she stopped her own work, and took a good look round. Eyes were meekly lowered, and double celerity was immediately displayed.

"Margaret!"

"Madame."

The harsh voice, and the gentle answer, were in curious contrast.

"Hither, wench."

From the farthest end of the great room, amongst the groups of industrious maidens, Margaret Cobham passed quietly forward, till she stood in front of her mother.

"Hast done that which I did command thee?"

"I have worked mine utmost, madame, but 'tis not ended."

"Thou darest tell me thus! It hath struck four of the clock! I did give thee till then, and no further."

"Mother, I have worked mine utmost," repeated Margaret calmly—not with the timidity of Eva de Malmayns, but with a submission at which all marvelled now, who had known Margaret de Cobham in former years.

"Thou art an unboxom‡ lass!"

The mother's hand fell heavily on her daughter as she spoke—not once only. Margaret's very brow flushed crimson under the indignity, but she did not speak.

"An unboxom lass!" repeated Lady Cobham indignantly. "'Tis not the first time this day, else had I been

* Leathern coat.

† Plume.

‡ Disobedient.

less sorely displeased. Wert thou at mass this morn, Margaret?"

Eyes were glancing up cautiously in all directions, as curiosity proved stronger than fear.

"Nay, madame," Margaret answered.

It was a question put to her daily now. For a while indulgence had been shown to her views, in accordance with Sir Reginald's advice, under the hope that her "fantasies" might speedily wear out. All intercourse by word or letter with Lollard friends was forbidden her, but otherwise she had not been treated with greatly more strictness than the other chambrières of the castle. Something of increasing pressure was beginning at length to be exercised, however.

"How oft again will I have to lay my commands upon thee in vain! If these be results of the pratings of thy Gospeleers* and Gospels, verily it is well thou art parted from them. I speak to thee no glosinget words, Margaret, neither will I. An evil-disposed wench art thou, unboxom in conduct and unhale in mind. I am verily wode† against thee, and against them who have led thee thus astray. But thou shalt return to the true faith, or shalt die for it. Hearest thou, wench?"

Margaret's flush had faded into whiteness before those stern hard tones, but she answered steadily—

"Yea, madame, I do hear ye."

"Wilt submit? Wilt do as thou art bid? I do command thee on the morrow for to be present at the mass. Dost hear, wench?"

"I do hear, madame," repeated Margaret.

"Dost hear, and wilt likewise obey? 'Tis of small avail to hear, and to do not. I tell thee I do apprise§ thine obedience over thine affection, and I be verily predetermined to check thine unboxom ways. Thou shalt

* Evangelists.

† Flattering.

‡ Furious.

§ Value.

babble no longer in my hearing concerning thy Gospels and thy Lollardy. Hast desire for aught of tidings, lass, concerning Lord Cobham—the evil-disposed heretic?"

"I would ever welcome tidings concerning him," said Margaret anxiously.

"Thou shalt welcome this with all thine heart. He hath abjured his heresy, and shiven himself unto a priest, and joined him unto the true faith."

Margaret did not exclaim. For one moment her head swam, and her heart went down like lead. The next she said quietly—

"Thou didst clepe him an heretic, a moment since, my mother."

"Soothly his vile heresy hath worked untold ill in the realm. Methinks 'twere better an they had speedily burnt him at the first, and not have awaited on and on, for no man knoweth what."

"Methinks they be somewhat afeared," said Margaret involuntarily.

"Thou may'st cease thy prating," was the sharp answer. "What think'st thou now of thy noble leader?"

"If it be sooth, I do grieve sorely for his fall," said Margaret.

"If! Thou darest accuse thy lady-mother of lesinge,* false-hearted wench!"

No question now about the Lady Alianore's anger. Margaret staggered back breathlessly from the heavy blow of that strong firm hand.

"Wilt dare to utter such words again to mine ears? If it be sooth!"

There was no pretence at industry now. The awestricken maidens gazed in terror upon the dame's infuriated brow, forgetting to take any heed to wheels or looms. Eva de Malmayns and one or two others broke

* Falsehood.

into low sobs, but no sound passed Margaret's lips, and no tear escaped her eyes. She only bent her head patiently, with her white lips parted, and her hand pressed to her chest.

"Thou didst mistake me, mother," she said rather faintly, when breath enough for speech came back. "I meant not to question in any wise thy words—save that once and again false bruits do travel hitherward."

"'Tis no false bruit that I do tell thee. Get thee gone, wench, and bethink thee well concerning the morrow. I will see thee at mass, or thou shalt bitterly rue it. Away!"

Silence fell upon the room, as Margaret passed out of sight. The Dame Alianore stood looking after her, with a stern frown upon her own dark low brow. No gleam of motherly love or pity seemed to strive with her bitter displeasure. Suddenly she woke up to the fact of the room's unwonted stillness, and flashed a look round upon the frightened chambrières.

"What are ye after now, maidens? Verily ye be moonstruck, the one and all of ye. 'Tis a lesson ye may take to heart for your own selves, witting how I, the Dame Cobham, will be ever obeyed in mine household. Ye will work an half-hour longer this day for your shameless idling."

Hands and wheels went fast enough thereafter, in dread of the half-hour becoming an hour. But the signal to cease was given at length, to the great relief of poor little Eva de Malmayns, who had only recently left her own home, and was far from accustomed yet to the dame's stern rule. She slipped timidly out of the room, and fled like a young fawn along the passage, but was pursued by the sound of more than one shrill voice—

"Eva! Eva de Malmayns. Damoiselle de Malmayns! come hither!"

Reluctantly, yet not daring to linger, Eva retraced her

steps, and entered again the large spinning-room. Lady de Cobham was standing near the door, and beckoned her to approach.

“Where art hastening, wench?”

“Madame—I—” Eva’s face grew white as the tall snowy wings which towered above the dame’s stately head. “Madame—I—I do desire for to repair a certain rent in my right-arm poke.”*

“Thou dost not seek Margaret?”

Despair gave Eva strength, and her soft blue eyes looked up a good deal more innocently than they had any right to do.

“Madame, I ken not where she be, but an ye have a message for to send I will even carry it.”

“Thou may’st bid her from me to appear this eve at supper. I will have none sulking in the soler, as she hath done ere now.”

“I will bid her, madame,” said Eva dutifully.

“Thou may’st begone,” said the dame shortly.

Glad of her dismissal, Eva glided slowly out of the room, and then again flew with all her speed along the passage, up the first stairs, and through other passages into the principal bed-chamber of the damoiselles.

“Margaret!—O Margaret!—I did deem I would find thee here.”

“What dost need, Eva?” asked Margaret wearily, lifting her head from her hands.

Eva stood looking at her for a minute, with eyes filling and overflowing like two blue convolvulus flowers. Then suddenly throwing her arms round Margaret, she cried heartily.

“O Margaret! O Margaret! how canst thou endure as thou dost? O Margaret, I do sorely long for mine own home and mine own folks! I do love none here but

* Sleeve.

thee, sweet Margaret. Oh, I wis not how to endure to see thee handled in such wise."

"'Tis nought, Eva. Thou need'st not to weep for me."

"'Tis sore—'tis much ; but she will do thee worse hurt on the morrow, an thou goest not to the mass. If thou would'st—if thou could'st—but quit thy heresy—"

"I ne will not nor cannot," said Margaret. "*Once* have I denied my Lord, and brought dishonour upon His name, and He hath given me His sweet pardon and His tender love. Would'st thou have me turn again, and grieve Him yet afresh ?"

"I know not—I wis not—I comprehend nought of these things," sobbed Eva. "I do but ken thy lady-mother will mayhap kill thee in her grievous wrath, and I will be left desolate."

"Nay, thou wilt make friends many. For me—'tis nought."

Eva looked up steadily in her face.

"Margaret !" she whispered ; "could'st thou—could'st thou—dare e'en to die ?"

"Ay, verily, for Him who did die for me—an He doth give me strength. And soothly He will fail me not."

"Hast thou no fear of death, nor of that which lieth after ?" asked Eva shrinkingly.

"Nay, these things trouble me not, Eva ;" and the smile on Margaret's face spoke far more than her words.

"But purgatory—how wilt thou brave the pains of purgatory, even if thou dost go to heaven after ? Mayhap 'twill be hundreds of years for thee first of bitter woe."

"I do find nought in Christ's Gospels concerning purgatory," said Margaret quietly. "Methinks He had scarce taken home with Him to paradise in one day the dying thief, an purgatory be needed for to purify them whom He hath washed in His blood. He speaketh never in His word, neither did the apostles, concerning any such

place at all. Lord Cobham did doubt. For me, I think of it never now at all in any wise."

" Margaret ! Margaret !—I do fear me thou art speaking words of fearful heresy," said Eva timidly. " I wot not whither they will lead thee. O Margaret, thou dost look so sad ! Hast thou sore pain from the blow our lady did bestow upon thee ?"

" 'Tis for Lord Cobham"—and for a moment Margaret's voice almost broke down. Had the standard-bearer indeed sunk so low ? Could the fearless confessor have failed at last ? " Nay, I believe it not," she said resolutely, answering her own thoughts. " He hath many and bitter enemies, and they do invent false bruits for to blacken his name."

" Hast pain, Margaret ?" asked Eva, rather afraid to venture on the subject of Sir John Oldcastle.

" Somewhat," said Margaret, with a little smile. " Did'st thou come hither for to find me and to give me consolation, little Eva ?"

" I would I might console thee. I came hither for to see thee, though I did profess to our dame that 'twas for the repairing of my rent poke. I will e'en have to do it, else will she be angered for to find I did deceive her."

Margaret shook her head, and looked grave.

" Nay, I wis well what thou would'st say," added Eva hastily. " But I be not Lollard, Margaret. I will confess the same unto Master Scrope, and do what small penance he shall bid me. Soothly he would sooner I did deceive our dame one hundred times, than that I should catch one spark of thy heresy, Margaret."

" Mayhap and doubtless," said Margaret, her lip curling slightly for a moment.

" Margaret, our lady did desire me avise thee that thou shalt be at the supper. She will have none sulking in the soler, she saith. I must needs tell thee faithfully, else will she be angered."

"I will pay good heed. Thou hadst best repair thy rent speedily, Eva ; 'tis close upon supper-hour."

And when Eva was gone, she put out the candle and went to the strong narrow window. Snow lay thickly on the wide expanse of country below, and over head there shone bright twinkling stars through the frosty atmosphere. Margaret gazed up steadily at first, and then knelt down in the dark chamber, with her face bowed low in her hands.

"I wis not if it be true ; but O God, Thou canst aid him, even yet. Save him, I do beseech Thee, from the hands of his foes. Let him not fail. Oh, guard him, that he dishonour not Thy Name. Also grant unto me strength for to endure ; for verily I am weak, neither am I meek and mild in heart, like unto Thee, my Saviour. These things do sorely stir and anger me, although I be outwardly silent. Give unto me a spirit of patient enduring, like unto Thine, my Lord, when man did grievously handle and persecute Thee. Do with me whatsoever Thou wilt, only so that Thou grant me strength for to witness for Thy name. Lord, I wis not what doth await me on the morrow, but Thou wottest. I may not go to the mass as my mother hath bidden me, and she will afresh be right wode against me. But I do commit myself unto Thee, for soothly Thou art faithful—Thou art loving. Christ Jesus, hear this my prayer for Thy Name's sake, I do beseech Thee."

And as the clang of the supper-horn rang through the castle, Margaret arose and went downstairs. Near the hall in a somewhat unfrequented passage, her brother Reginald was standing, and he stopped her when she came up.

"I did look to see thee come thither. A word with thee, Margaret."

She lifted her eyes patiently to his. "Thou art welcome, Reginald."

His brows were bent in evident displeasure. " Margaret, wittest thou how sorely thou hast angered our mother this day ?"

" For that I did not work all that which she did mark out for me ?"

" For that thou didst not go to the mass. Dar'st make belief thou dost not comprehend ?"

" Nay, I make believe nought, albeit I be not bound for to accuse myself unto thee," said Margaret, with calm reasonableness. " I wot well 'tis the matter of the mass which doth most trouble her."

" Wilt thou go on the morrow ?"

" Nay, that will I not," said Margaret steadily.

" Then forsooth, and thou must endure that which thy headstrong foolery shall entail upon thee."

Angrily he was turning away. But she caught just the accompanying shade of sorrowful regret which was wholly wanting in her mother, and touched his arm to detain him.

" Hast thought better of thy contumacy ? Wilt yield, Margaret ?"

" I cannot, nor I may not. One word with thee, Reginald. Thou wilt speak unto me words of sooth. Concerning Lord Cobham—how thinkest thou of this bruit ?"

" I know not, neither care," said Reginald shortly.

" Thinkest thou he hath verily abjured ?"

" Twere well an he did."

" Thou deemest he hath not ?"

" His abjuration have all men seen. 'Tis in plain terms. Albeit I doubt not he will speedily return him unto his Lollardy."

" If he have abjured, he will be speedily released from prison," said Margaret.

" Mayhap."

"Hath he been set free? On thy knightly honour I do put the question."

"Nay."

A flush of hope rose in her cheeks.

"Then do I put small belief in his abjuration; for wherefore should they detain a Catholic in the Tower?"

"For to make him smart for past grievances, perchance," said Reginald drily. "Netheless—since thou hast put me upon knightly honour, and I must needs answer thee in all plainness—if accounts be true, Sir John Oldcastle is now within Tower walls no longer."

"Freed!" said Margaret.

"He hath escaped—'tis said—at dead of night, and hath hid him safely, no man weting where."

"Wherefore lie hid, if he be Catholic, Reginald?"

"I wis nougħt concerning him; I am wearied of his name? We may not linger more, Margaret. The horns have long sounded."

CHAPTER XXII.

ST. GILES' FIELD.

IN one of the uppermost chambers of a tall narrow house, upon London Bridge, sat Sir William Cheyne, busily writing. A few feet distant Gytha was kneeling close to the small glazed window, gazing out with eager girlish interest upon the—to her—unwonted scene. It was only three days since she had accompanied her father on his return from Coulyng Castle to the city.

Gytha thought she could never weary of watching the clear steady flow of water below, especially where it foamed round the old buttresses, and quickened to a rush in its passage under the arches. There was a never-ending excitement in seeing little boats win their way through those same narrow arches, more especially when the rower chanced to be unskilful, and an overturn seemed imminent. Or again she would turn her attention to the swans which sailed gracefully about, arching their long necks and preening their snowy plumage. And often she gazed at the tall dark buildings on either bank, marvelling who might live within, and what of joy or sorrow was there concealed from the outer gaze.

“Gytha,” said Sir William suddenly,—“thou hast a clerky hand. Wilt copy this for me speedily, child?”

Gytha sprang up to obey. He laid a large sheet of paper on the coffer, with quill and inkhorn.

"Folks do talk greatly still of Lord Cobham, his pretended abjuration. I do desire to append this his own bill unto divers more public walls or buildings, that none may omit to read it. Canst make me six fair copies of the same, Gytha?"

"I will joyously do aught for thee, my father; also for him. And as speedily as may be."

"Read unto me the words, that I may be ware thou mistakest none."

Gytha stood up before him, and obeyed at once, with her clear steady intonation.

"Forasmuch as Sir John Oldcastle, knight, and Lord Cobham, is untruly convicted and imprisoned, falsely reported and slandered among the common people by his adversaries, that he should otherwise both think and speak of the sacraments of the Church, and specially of the blessed sacrament of the altar, than was written in the confession of his belief, which was indented and taken to the clergy, and so set up in divers open places in the city of London; known be it here to all the world that he hath never since varied in any point therefrom; but this is plainly his belief, that all the sacraments of the Church be profitable and expedient also to all them that shall be saved, taking them after the intent that Christ and His true Church have ordained. Furthermore he believeth that in this blessed sacrament of the altar is verily and truly Christ's body in form of bread."

"Also," said Sir William, "thou mayest inscribe below, 'Writ by the Lord Cobham within the Tower, and sent out privily unto his friends therefrom.'"

"Tis writ here, my father," said Gytha. "I will e'en copy the words."

"Ay!" Sir William took the paper from her hands, and gazed at it steadily. "Somewhat could I wish that

he had spoken in other wise. Methinks 'tis scarce plain enough as concerning his belief generally."

"Father, thou deemest not that Sir John faltereth ever?" said Gytha reproachfully.

"Nay; albeit there be some who know not him neither his doctrine as do I."

"Father, dost thou in all points of doctrine be of full agreement with him?" asked Gytha suddenly.

"Nay; in all do I not. There be Catholics many who would shrink not from subscribing unto Sir John his view concerning the sacrament. He sticketh ever to his point that the bread be bread still, as saith St. Paul. But saving and except that in a sense he holdeth that truth, I do see but small difference betwixt his doctrine and theirs. For the very body of Christ, which did suffer and die and rise again, he doth assert to be there present."

Gytha's large eyes looked earnestly at her father for a moment.

"I do remember that Margaret once said like words unto me, before that she herself was led to speak words of denial; after the which she would speak no more of such things. I did warn her not to be wiser than Lord Cobham. Mayhap thou wouldst deem me wrong, my father."

"'Tis well maidens be humble," said Sir William. "Yet methinks Dame Margaret had even the truth of the matter. I wot not how, if Christ be ever standing at God's right hand in the heavens, His body shall at the self-same time be broken on the altar. Neither doth the Word teach of many thousand sacrifices of Christ for our sins, but of one only, which is past and done for ever. Soothly in spirit is He with us, 'in all days till the ending of the world,' as he behight* to them who do love Him. But in body

* Promised.

—nay!—till He shall come again in His majesty, and all His angels with Him."

"Hast thou spoken with Sir John concerning this matter, my father?"

"'Tis long since he and I have been together. And there be many things which I do see more clearly now, but which before my long and weary sickness were dim unto mine understanding. But now have I somewhat to tell thee. Wilt grieve to be alone this eve?"

"I will write for thee, my father, to while away the hours." Gytha looked curious to hear more, but ventured no questions.

"I would Alfgar were in thy place, that he might be my companion," said Sir William, with a little mournfulness in his tone, as he spoke the words. More cheerfully he added, "'Tis a gathering of Lollards in Ficket's Field, St. Giles', little Gytha, whereat I would be present. Sir John Beverley will be there for to speak unto us words of Gospel comfort, and likewise Sir Roger Acton, and many others. Since the passing of the late Act, we do soothly need to gather late, and after dark, and with care, in lonely spots, like to the disciples of Christ in olden days."

This Act to which Sir William referred, was a matter of serious import to the Lollard party. Bitter complaints had been carried before the king, concerning the followers of Wickliffe, and the growth and spread of their opinions, which were declared to be subversive of all order and all Church and temporal government in the realm. Whereupon the king had called together a parliament at Leicester, not daring, it was said, to summon it in London, on account of the extreme popularity of Lord Cobham.

And in course of this parliament, amidst efforts of the king to wrest power and wealth from his clergy, and subtle endeavours of the clergy to turn his attention and ambi-

tion away from themselves to the country of France—a stern Act was passed against the Lollards, “to be a law for ever.” There was to be no more teaching and preaching of these opinions among men. No men should dare to read the Scripture in their mother tongue, under penalty of “forfeiting land, cattle, body, life, and goods from their heirs for ever, and so being condemned for heretics to God, enemies to the crown, and most errant traitors to the land.”* Sanctuary was permitted to thieves and murderers, but harshly denied to Lollards. “And if in case they would not give over, or were after their pardon relapsed, they should suffer death in two manner of kinds: that is, they should first be hanged for treason against the king, and then be burned for heresy against God.”

“Father, think’st thou they will dare despoil thee ever of thy house and lands?” asked Gytha wistfully, well knowing the Act to which he referred. She had had this dread much in her mind of late, but had not spoken it until now.

“Mayhap! The spoiling of a surety hath already begun. But in the far west of this realm they be not so active in persecuting of Lollards, as they be in London and thereabouts. I do fear more for the Lady Cobham —albeit she professeth not Lollardy, and Sir John hath not the lands but by wedding of her. Nethless, I doubt me little, the Churchmen will scarce be slack to use so fair an opportunity for enriching of their pockets.”

“Methinks ’twould break her heart to lose her fair possessions,” said Gytha sorrowfully.

“Ay, and little marvel were it so. ’Tis sore to part, e’en when ’tis for love of our Lord Christ, and He doth make up for all else. But I misdoubt the Lady Cobham wotteth not much of Christ His joy.”

* Bale.

"Father, thou knowest not yet where Lord Cobham is in hiding, neither how he did escape?" said Gytha suddenly.

"'Tis best thou should'st put to no man the former question," said Sir William soberly. "I say not whether or no I do ken, but an I did I would in no wise tell it thee. Soothly might they torture thee, for to make thee confess thy knowledge. As concerning thy latter question, folks do much conjecture, and mayhap be all far from the truth. Some do deem King Harry, under certain relentings, did so contrive that his faithful knight should not be held too close in hold. Some do deem Sir Roger Acton had a foremost hand in the matter. Others would ascribe it unto the ready wit and cunning of Sir John himself. Methinks 'tis little matter, so he be free, and that without denial of his faith."

"And thou deemest him not like to be caught again?" said Gytha anxiously.

"I do pray he may not be."

And Sir William began to dress himself in the armour, without which it would not have been safe to venture into the country after dark. Gytha's little fingers aided him to the best of their ability. He had no squire at hand, for the more unobtrusive his style of living the more safe for himself just then.

"And thou wilt meet many folks, and ye will all read and pray at St. Giles'," said Gytha soberly, when the dark surcoat and short mantle had been donned, and the sword hung by his side. "I would I might go also."

"I would I might safely take thee," said Sir William, laying a hand on her head.

"But, my father, think'st thou there will be aught of peril for thee?" asked Gytha tremblingly.

"Nay; I wis not. Mayhap none. An aught did hap

unto me, Gytha, I have given unto Mistress Elizabeth directions concerning what she shall do with thee."

He could never quit the room without that feeling—“*If anything should happen to him.*” With him it was a matter of simple calculation of possibilities. With Gytha it was a real living terror. She had never loved her father so dearly as now, and well she knew the risks he ran.

It was not her way, however, to give way to useless lamentations beforehand. Mistress Elizabeth, the old and trustworthy retainer who had accompanied her from Cobham, came into the room, carrying some work ; and Gytha sat down to her copying, with a quiet manner, though with a heavy heart. Neither of them spoke much about the anxiety which both were enduring. Mistress Elizabeth gave vent to one or two muttered grumbles about “these heretical ways,” and the trouble they caused. But she liked Sir William, and she dearly loved his gentle daughter, and not for worlds would she have seen either of them in the persecutor’s hands.

At the usual bedtime they retired, for Sir William was certain not to be home till midnight at the earliest, and Mistress Elizabeth would hear of no sitting up. Hour after hour Gytha lay awake, listening alternately to her companion’s heavy slumbrous breathing, and the quick beating of her own heart ; listening also for footsteps which never came. At an unusually early hour she was up and dressed ; but Sir William’s room remained untouched, as she had left it the night before.

Heartsick and already almost hopeless, Gytha took up her station at the front-room window, looking down into the cold dark cheerless street. Looking, but not seeing anything, for all was utter darkness, save once when a watchman, torch in hand, passed slowly by. She was earlier than the rest of the little world around her, that

morning. Mistress Elizabeth presently brought her some breakfast, and she drank the milk, but could not touch the bread.

And then she sat and waited, with a sense of dull misery pressing on her heart. Gradually she could see the occupants in the opposite house waking up, and the housewives and housedughters busied with their daily household duties. The dawn was now breaking over the housetops, and she watched it with a sort of weary fascination, sitting all alone. Presently Mistress Elizabeth came back, and Gytha saw she had on her hood and cloak. Daylight had fairly set in by this time, and the busy world was astir.

"Where art going?" Gytha asked listlessly.

"Nowhere, Dame Gytha. I have already been—and—"

She hesitated, and Gytha's heavy eyes looked anxiously at her.

"Hast heard tidings, Elizabeth?"

"Of Sir William—soothly, nay."

"Of some sort or kind thou hast heard!"

"There be bruits about the city, Dame Gytha. 'Tis said—I wis not with how much of sooth—'tis said there hath been somewhat of a Lollard rising, and the king himself with his men-at-arms hath been out for the putting of it down. There be marvellous tales told."

"Tell me them all, I pray thee," said Gytha huskily.

"'Tis said a Lollard camp of twenty thousand armed men did gather yestere'en in St. Giles' fields; and some men do extol the bravery of King Harry, for that he shrank not to face so mighty odds. But the greater number of folks, meseemeth, be on the Lollard side, and do speak lovingly of our dear Lord Cobham."

"Believest thou the tale of twenty thousand?" asked Gytha.

"Truly, Dame Gytha, save and except they did fly I wis not how so vast a body of men might come thus suddenly together, no man knowing of the same. But—"

"Hast more for to tell me?"

"There be many taken prisoner, I do fear me—of them who were gathered there at night," said Elizabeth, lowering her voice. "Mayhap—mayhap—Sir William Cheyne be not one."

But a sobbing cry broke from Gytha, and she threw herself down with her face on the coffer, weeping bitterly. And the next moment the door opened gently, and Sir William's strong arms lifted her up.

"Little Gytha, didst deem thou should'st see me never again? Truly thou hadst reason."

"Father, art thou now in peril?" asked Gytha fearfully.

"Nay; I deem not more than at other times. But I did barely escape the king and his company. And Sir Roger Acton and Sir John Beverley, and many others be taken."

CHAPTER XXIII.

WHAT TO DO?

“SIR WILLIAM, I did deem thou wouldest more speedily have returned, for to give me comfort in my sore distress. Ah, me ! it hath been a Christmas of woe and weeping unto me this year.”

There was a piteous tone of reproachful complaint in Lady Cobham’s voice, and her beautiful eyes were sunken and dim with tear-shedding. Her very dress seemed to have lacked the usual thought and care bestowed upon it, and it was with an air of deepest dejection that she took Gytha’s hand.

“Hast heard the grievous tidings—that I—the Dame of Cobham—be a homeless and landless wretch—cast forth upon the world, for the scorn of men ! Oh that such things may be in this fair realm !”

“Mayhap homeless and landless, but thou wilt never be friendless, dear dame,” whispered Gytha.

“I wot not ! I wot not !” said Lady Cobham half-petulantly. “There be many friends who do hide their heads in days of sorrow. Sir William, I marvel ye did not come hither more speedily.”

“So speedily as might be have I come, gentle dame,” Sir William made answer. “Divers affairs did claim mine attention, else had I sooner been here.”

“I wis not what affairs might more closely claim thee

than this my desolate condition, Sir William," said the lady hastily.

"Ye do speak sooth. Save and except that I did in no wise venture to quit London, till I might be well assured that Sir John had verily escaped beyond reach of them who sought for to trouble him."

"Thou wittest where he now hideth him!" exclaimed Lady Cobham eagerly.

Sir William had not the least intention of letting slip facts which were safer unknown. "Madame, I do trust he lieth safe for awhile from his persecutors. But I would fain know concerning Alfgar."

"He thirsteth sorely for tidings, and grieveth bitterly that he may not go unto his lord. Come hither, Sir William, and he shall even hear with me all thou hast to say."

She led the way into the small turret chamber, wherein Alfgar Cheyne had lain throughout his illness. He was lying there still; utterly unable as yet to rise from the bed. A velvet fur-lined mantle was wrapped round him for warmth, and the wasted face above rested languidly on one of his transparent hands, while the two grey eyes were heavy with exceeding weakness, and sadly mournful in expression.

"Gytha!" and he held out his hand for a moment, but let it drop again. "What tidings? What tidings?" he muttered feverishly.

"How hast thou been of late, mine Alfgar?" asked Gytha leaning over him.

"Mind me not. No strength cometh yet, else would I not lie here, a useless pest unto all who do love me. Gytha, what tidings?"

"Sir John hath so far eluded pursuit," said Sir William, coming near.

"Ay; and verily the king seemeth determined for to overtake him," said Alfgar. "A price set upon his head, quotha!"

"'Tis even so," Sir William answered gravely. "Five hundred marks unto any man who shall cause him to be taken, or one thousand marks unto any man who shall take him, with twenty pounds a year for his lifetime, and freedom altogether from taxes for his native city."

"What think'st thou hath angered the king afresh so grievously against him?" asked Lady Cobham. "For 'twas not thus proclaimed on his first escaping; neither did they immediately make him outlaw, and his lands forfeit! Ah me! to think—"

"'Twas the affair of St. Giles' fields," Sir William answered briefly.

"Ha! I do desire to hear more," exclaimed Alfgar, raising himself impulsively, only to sink back again with an exhausted sigh. "Canst tell us the full verity, my father?"

"So far as I myself do wot the same. 'Twas a gathering—as gatherings had been before—for the reading of Christ's Gospels in surety. Thus and no more was told unto me, save that wild rumours did over and again trouble me. Methinks Sir Roger Acton's right restless spirit hath worked much evil in this matter; albeit he be verily a good man."

"I like him not," said Alfgar decisively.

"Yet he loveth Sir John, and an he schemed did scheme for him."

"But concerning the St. Giles' gathering?" said Alfgar.

"Concerning the same! I did leave my little Gytha and went for to join them. And in the darkness, amongst the lonely thickets of St. Giles', were many gathered—Sir John Beverley of the number, who did speak unto us words of Gospel cheer. I did note that Sir Roger

Acton was of a somewhat restless demeanour, and once he did mutter, ‘I marvel that no more from the city be present.’ Yet I thought not much thereof—neither do I now; although men do bruit it abroad that he did expect a gathering of twenty thousand Londoners—Lollards—for to march against the king. Methinks Sir Roger, albeit a brave man, were scarce so hairbrained in his expectations.”

“And my lord—was he there?” demanded Lady Cobham.

“An he were so, ‘twas in hiding; for I saw him not, neither do I in any wise credit the same. But after awhile, I, thinking of my Gytha alone in the city, did quit the gathering somewhat early, and return home-wards. Then to my amazement finding the city gates shut, and that by order of the king none might go out nor come in, I did retrace my steps, marvelling what this might portend. And ere I could come unto them again, the king with a mighty body of men-at-arms—so some say, albeit mayhap ‘twas not so many—did set upon them, and make many prisoners. And I fear me the king doth fully believe all the evil br uitings which be sent about concerning the twenty thousand which had gathered but for the shutting of the gates; also of the evil and violent deeds they proposed to have done.”

“Think’st thou the king will not deal mercifully with these his prisoners?” asked Lady Cobham anxiously.

There was a moment’s silence, and then Sir William spoke in constrained tones—“The king hath been deceived. He thinketh he hath now need for severity. Sir Roger Acton and Sir John Beverley be both the two condemned to death for treason; also yesterday were thirty-seven of them who were taken at St. Giles’, drawn unto the selfsame spot, and there were all hanged—and seven

among them burnt, both men and gallows. Likewise another thirty be yet condemned to suffer the same."

"Thank God thou art not of the number, my father," said Alfgar hoarsely.

"How thinkest thou the king did first get him the notion concerning the St. Giles' gathering?" asked Lady Cobham presently—too awe-struck for the tears which often flowed so readily.

Sir William's brow bent sternly. "I have somewhat here to tell thee—ay, and Gytha likewise—the which I have hidden from her as yet. The king this year, as he was a keeping his Christmas at Eltham*—seven miles distant from the city, as ye wot well—was avised of a certain conspiracy, of which men did accuse the Lollards. Methinks the king put not much faith in the bruit, but he did immediately send word unto the mayor, that any 'suspicious person should be put into hold. Thereupon did the mayor himself, with a strong body of men, go speedily unto the sign of the Arc, without Bishop's gate, at ten of the clock that night. They did carry off with them John Burgate, whose house it was, and likewise seven other men, of whom was one an esquire of Sir John's."

"Of my lord? Oh tell me speedily which, and what his name!" cried Lady Cobham.

Sir William looked down and went steadily on with his tale.

"Thereupon these seven suspect men were sent by the mayor unto Eltham, for that the king himself might examine them after his pleasure. And they—but specially the said squire—did make confession, or invention, of designs of Sir John, and his friends, for to gather a camp in St. Giles' fields, and there to fight against

* Stow's Chronicle.

the king, and thereafter to destroy monasteries, and put down the Catholic religion. Small marvel that the king did take alarm thereupon, and privily speed him unto Westminster, whence he did take precautions, such as the shutting of the gates, and himself did bravely go forth to confront the enemy." A dry smile crossed Sir William's face as he spoke. "And albeit the mighty host of twenty thousand did dwindle down unto one hundred men gathered together in the darkness, yet believeth he still the treason, and that but for the closing of the city gates, sore evil had come to pass."

"And the squire," said Gytha, looking steadily at her father,—"how clepe ye his name?"

"Ay, verily would I wis the same," said Lady Cobham.

"Canst not conjecture?" asked Sir William, looking from one to the other.

"Methinks but one alone of his lordship's squires had ever acted in such wise," said Gytha.

"And he—" began Sir William questioningly.

"Arnold Savage, my father."

An indignant exclamation of remonstrance from Lady Cobham, and a quiet "Soothly," from Sir William, came together. Lady Cobham started back, and her face crimsoned.

"Thou sayest—'tis *he*!—Arnold Savage! Speakest thou sooth, Sir William? Arnold Savage?"

"Arnold Savage, and none other, fair dame."

"I marvel not thereat," said Gytha. "He hath but now shown him to thee as he is, and as I long have kenned him."

"The false-hearted craven deceiver!" said Lady Cobham sternly. "Well thou hast not wedded him, my Gytha! The coward graceless wretch! Thou hast been long free from him, in all save that I willed it otherwise; but verily

now thou art altogether free. I did marvel that he returned not these past few weeks, but methought he had business for Sir John to do. Methinks he be scarce like for to show his face unto us again."

"Arnold Savage had never stuck by a falling house," muttered Alfgar.

"Speak of him no more," said Lady Cobham. "I would fain I might hear never his name again. Sir William, I do sorely thirst for tidings of my lord, an thou canst give them unto me. Also I am in deep distress and perplexity concerning mine own self."

"Of thy lord can I tell thee little. For thyself—'tis well we do give earnest heed unto this matter. What dost purpose, gentle dame?"

"For to go unto Sterborough."

She spoke decisively, though her last words had been of perplexity.

"Sterborough!" Sir William repeated gravely. "Nay, dear dame—methinks yonder be no safe nor sure abiding-place for thee. Wilt not rather deign to enter mine own humble dwelling?"

"I thank thee for thy gentle courtesy, Sir William, and mayhap will ere long accept of thine hospitality. But I do purpose first to go unto mine own kin at Sterborough Castle."

"Dost deem it wise?" asked Sir William doubtfully. "Methinks they be strongly opposed unto Lollardy."

"I be no Lollard, Sir William," said the lady somewhat hastily. "Neither for a guest were there peril—e'en if so I were."

"Thou wilt not the rather come first unto us?" asked Sir William.

"For mine own safety? Think'st thou, Sir William, a Lollard household be safer than a Catholic household, in these days?"

Sir William shook his head sorrowfully in answer.

"For the which reason I do purpose also the carrying of fair Gytha thither with me," said Lady Cobham.

"Nay, madame—thereto can I in no wise agree," said Sir William. "An a Catholic household be more safe for a Catholic, 'tis not so for a Lollard."

"And thou wouldest part mine own sweet Gytha from me ! Ah ! Sir William, I deemed thee not thus cruel, in my distress. Sorely have I missed her these past weeks—but an I must altogether lose her, 'twill break mine heart."

"Madame, e'en for thy sake I dare not send my Gytha into such deep peril," said Sir William with firmness, though very much grieved at the lady's sorrowful face.

"He will part us, Gytha—thou, my fairest chambrière; the one who loveth me most—unto me like a child ; he will part us—soothly—soothly,—now that I be alone and desolate, and none be left to care for me. Oh, 'twill break mine heart !"

Deeper and deeper sobs broke through the words, and drawing her veil round her face, she wept violently. Sir William sat, anxiously watching her, with a perplexed frown on his brow. Gytha, wearing a pale but quiet look, knelt still by her brother's side, simply waiting till the matter should be decided for her.

"Fair dame—" began Sir William, hesitating a little.

"Ah ! thou art sorely sorely cruel, Sir William," moaned Lady Cobham. "Mine own and only comfort thou wouldest tear from me."

"Fair dame—I beseech—I beseech thee—"

"None left to comfort nor to love me," sobbed Lady Cobham.

"An thou wouldest but travel unto mine own home !" pleaded Sir William.

"I do thank thee, Sir William, for thy knightly cour-

tesy. 'Thou wouldest have me—the Dame of Cobham—for to put myself in peril, that my chambrière be the safer!'

She reined up her head in queenly style for a moment, and then let it sink as she burst afresh into weeping.

"I pr'ythee, pardon me, dear lady," faltered Sir William, somewhat confounded at this view of the question; "albeit—thou wottest—'tis but the weakness of a father's love."

Alfgar was whispering to Gytha, and she spoke up suddenly—

"Father, I would fain go unto Sterborough with my Lady Cobham, an thou wilt permit the same."

"Child, 'twere fraught with peril," said Sir William gravely. "Thou wittest not. 'Tis a Catholic household, and thou mayest not hide thy lantern's shining."

"I purpose not so to do, my father." A light glittered softly in her eyes as she spoke. "Methinks—an' 'tis my duty—I may even brave the peril and dread not."

Sir William rose and paced the room with hurried steps.

"An it *be* thy duty," he muttered at length. "I wot not if so it be."

"Verily, my father, 'tis my duty for to attend upon my lady, unto whom I be so much indebted; and whom my Lord Cobham did at last parting give into mine especial charge."

Sobbing still, Lady Cobham left the chamber. Alfgar raised himself upon one arm with an eager red spot in his cheek.

"I wis not how best to counsel, neither would I that Gytha should needlessly enter peril; yet bethink thee, father, of Sir John, and whether he were content that his dame should be thus left desolate."

"I wot not," repeated Sir William sorrowfully. "Children, the neither of ye do ken how great would be the peril."

They thought they knew, and exchanged meaning glances. Gytha felt so fearless—so ready to go even to martyrdom or death. There was no girlish timidity or shrinking from pain in her composition, with all her apparent softness and gentleness. Like many others in days of persecution, there were times when she could almost have longed to be so permitted to honour her Master's name. But such bright brave confident souls were not always the ones whose light shone most brightly throughout, or who were chosen to suffer in the way they would themselves have willed. Otherwise it might have been thought that the strength was in themselves, and not in their Lord. Rather were the weak ones endued with Heavenly strength and brought before the world, while the strong ones were shown their weakness. And Gytha had yet to learn how Satan, in bringing his darts of temptation to bear upon the saints of God, chooses not the strong but the weak point of each, for his attack.

Something of this bright readiness to face peril for her lady's sake formed Gytha's motive, but mingling with it was also a thought of Margaret. She loved Lady Cobham, but to Margaret Cobham her very heart's devotion had been given. And this same thought it was which made Alfgar—without searching for his own reasons—seem disposed to throw his influence on the Sterborough side of plans discussed.

"I would I might even go myself," he broke out earnestly. "Father, dost deem I will soon again be well in health?"

"Truly, Alfgar, 'tis long since I have spoken unto the leech; but many weeks gone he wotted not wherefore thou didst not more speedily mend."

"More speedily!" Alfgar fell back again on the pillow and passed his hand over his brow, where drops of

exhaustion were starting thickly. " 'Tis no mending at all of late, methinks ; and I do burn in heart for to join my lord."

" Thou couldst not do the twain," said Sir William, referring to his wish to be at Sterborough.

" Nay ; but an I did gain but a little strength, I would even do the one. Gytha, I am weary."

He closed his eyes and lay silent, completely spent with the effort of so much conversation.

" He hath mended little," said Sir William, sighing. " Methinks I will have to carry him home unto my dame for to be revived."

" Think'st thou he may endure the journeying, my father ?" asked Gytha doubtfully.

" Ay," muttered Alfgar. " Sith I may not go with my lady—best be nearer to my lord—an he goeth westward—"

" Thou hast talked enough," said Gytha, as his lips whitened. " Father, dost thou consent for that I do go unto Sterborough with my lady ?"

" I must e'en consider the matter," said Sir William cautiously. " An it be verily thy duty—"

" I doubt me it were matter of sore grief unto Sir John, an our lady had none but Catholics about her," said Gytha ; and the argument evidently weighed with Sir William, though he repeated—

" I must fain consider. Mayhap—an she giveth her behest to remain there not long, and to protect thee to her uttermost—mayhap—"

And there Sir William broke off. But to himself he muttered—

" I wis well 'twill have to be, sith the dame hath set her heart thereupon."

CHAPTER XXIV.

A STERBOROUGH CASTLE BANQUET.

A GREAT banquet was taking place at Sterborough Castle, in honour of the return home of Sir Reginald Cobham with his bride. Many months back, when troubles had begun to thicken round the household of Sir John Oldcastle, Eleanor Culpepper had returned to her own home to escape any possible imputation of "Lollardy." And thence had Sir Reginald fetched her—his wedded dame—unto his own domain.

She was decidedly a handsome girl, though wanting in animation; but her regular passionless features and slow dignity did not look ill-suited to her high position, as she sat enthroned beside her husband on the massive chair. Upon Sir Reginald's other side was seated the Lady Alianore, evidently not much enjoying her own secondary station, where she had been so long accustomed to reign. In truth, there was little question but that she would reign still, although the honours of office might have to be divided.

A great throng of noble and knightly guests was gathered together for the occasion, each bringing with him a certain number of followers; so, little marvel, that the hall was filled to its utmost extent. Three tables ran from the dais to the farthest end, and at the upper table upon the dais a right gorgeously apparelled company was assembled. Amongst their number might have been seen the smooth

plump face and portly frame of Master Scrope, the family priest and confessor.

What a comfortable benevolent countenance he had, with his double chin, and little laughing eyes, and unwrinkled forehead. The cares of office had evidently sat upon him very lightly hitherto. And then he was so kind-hearted and indulgent, and so ready to pass lightly over any little passing offences in the members of his flock : such as convenient deceit, or disobedience, or greediness, or drunkenness, as the case happened to be. The penances he ordered were so slight that they gave scarcely any trouble at all. Everybody liked and praised Master Scrope in his priestly office, except some few who had vision keen enough to see below the surface.

For there *was* another side to the character of this man —this jovial, comfortable, sporting, drinking priest of the middle ages, who preached in church with his falcon on his wrist, and never failed to join in any passing scenes of conviviality, and who was moreover a very fair average specimen of his class. He could skim full easily over many offences of which the law of God would take stern cognisance, inasmuch as he habitually committed the same himself. But let a secret of heresy come to his nostrils!—bah—Master Scrope was another individual altogether.

Not that the change would appear in his demeanour. A sinister gleam in the corners of his twinkling eyes, and a more full display of his handsome white teeth, might give a hint to the initiated. Otherwise, Master Scrope was hardly ever known to vary in his mild good-tempered fatherly benevolence of demeanour. But all this while the serpent within was coiling itself ready for the fatal spring. He would never miss his aim by too hasty a motion. Let the victim be young or old, fair or plain, it mattered not. At any and every cost the spark of heresy

must be stamped out. The Church must be upheld. The sweetest child-face ever seen, if enlisted in the cause of heresy, became hideous as that of the veriest hag in the eyes of Master Scrope. Other offences of whatever description might be condoned without difficulty, with the help of a smiling recommendation to a few extra Ave Marias or Paternosters. But heresy!—nothing less than fierce red curling flames for that offence against the authority of Mother-Church would suit Master Scrope.

The trumpets had clanged to summon the guests, and had clanged the second time to announce the arrival of the ewer, with his jug and basin and attendant. A third clang now ushered in the first grand procession from the kitchen, of maître-d'hotel, valets, and squires, bearing huge joints and substantial dishes. The tables had been already covered by the unfailing spotless table-cloths, and crowded with a mass of splendid plate, including magnificently-carved golden and silver goblets, cups and drinking-pots, many of which were never used save on like grand occasions. But just at this moment, when the business of carving and serving was about to take place, something of an interruption occurred. It was nothing unusual in kind. Guests, unexpectedly arriving at the outer gate, claimed hospitality—a claim never to be disregarded. Welcome, thrice welcome, would be accorded. But who were the guests, and of what degree? This was an important question, since on it hung the decision whether Sir Reginald should meet them at the gate, or at the postern, or at the hall door, or should simply receive them on the dais.

“The Dame Joan Cobham, of Cobham!”

“Ha!” and a very decided shadow came over Sir Reginald’s face. But there was no longer any doubt respecting his knightly duty to the fair baroness of high degree. He

strode down the great hall, with his golden spurs clanking, and his long blue velvet mantle trailing after him. Something of a hush of expectation fell on the assembled company ; and presently Sir Reginald appeared again in the doorway, leading by the hand his unlooked-for guest. Two of his squires followed, performing the same office for the younger Joan and for Gytha Cheyne. The remainder of the travelling party, under whose escort Lady Cobham had journeyed, came in behind and found such places as they might at the lower tables ; while the three ladies, in their plain dark travelling suits, advanced to the dais, there to be received by Sir Reginald's wife and mother.

Long care and trouble had worn away somewhat of the Lady Joan of Cobham's beauty ; yet even now her gracious winning courtesy showed in marked contrast to Dame Alianore's stern brusquerie. Many present gazed admiringly upon her, and only turned from her to gaze with yet more unqualified admiration upon the fairer and sweeter face of her *chamrière*. Joan attracted only a small share of attention ; but Gytha Cheyne, in her simple serge dress and blue hood, soon had every eye in the hall fixed upon her. Once, in her passage to the dais, she lifted slowly her long dark lashes in search of Margaret ; but the quest was unsuccessful, and they went down again speedily before the multitude of inquisitive looks which she encountered. A slight colour flushed into her cheeks, but her gentle composure remained unchanged.

Sir Reginald knew her well again, and muttered—

“The favoured *chamrière*—daughter of Sir William Cheyne of Herefordshire—my mother.”

Whereupon Dame Alianore's bent brows promised small welcome to Gytha. For Eleanor Culpepper had not failed to make them acquainted with Gytha's influence over Mar-

garet in the past ; and having suffered many a pang of jealousy herself respecting the young chamrière's superior charms, her tale had been tinged with a certain bitterness which took effect upon her hearers. Master Scrope of course knew all about the matter. There was nothing known in the household which failed to reach his ears.

And it was his doing, though nobody perceived how he managed it, that while seats were speedily found for Lady Cobham and Joan, Gytha stood back neglected and unheeded. Sir Reginald was too true a knight to have treated any lady thus, Lollard or no Lollard ; but his attention was skilfully claimed, with that of the maître-d'hotel, by Master Scrope. Only for a minute—but it was just long enough to mark the lack of welcome, and that was all Master Scrope wanted.

He saw in what manner it was taken too ; and he bit his lips to perceive how small was his power to disconcert that young girl, who had come within his reach. She stood calmly there upon the dais, apart, alone, neglected ; but with no look of pain or distress on her sweet serene face, while her grey eyes were fixed on the gorgeous tapestry of the walls, evidently seeing nothing before her ; a little sad in expression, but by no means impatient.

Just so much he had time to note. And then his ungallant deed defeated its own aim. A few paces distant a knight sprang from his seat, with a wrathful gleam in his blue eyes.

“Sir Reginald, I prythee pardon me, but thy lack of service I will dare supply. Fair maiden, there is space for thee hither beside me.”

He took her hand and led her courteously to the seat. The maître-d'hotel hurried up to attend to his neglected business of arranging the place of each guest, and would

officially have removed Gytha elsewhere, but was haughtily waved aside by the young knight.

"Thine office have I usurped for the nonce, and thou mayest begone about thy business. Your name, fair dame;" and having caught the brief reply, his voice rang through the hall—"Ho, squires! attendance on the Damoiselle de Cheyne, and that right speedily."

Gytha was under no more danger whatever of suffering neglect, though she would have preferred a less conspicuous defence of her rights. Sir Reginald's annoyed frown arose more from vexation at his own unwonted breach of courtesy than from any other cause, though Gytha's presence was by no means satisfactory to him. Whatever Master Scrope's sensations might have been, he only smiled benignantly over his loaded trencher and well-filled goblet. Eleanor and the younger Joan cast each some jealous glances, however, towards Gytha; and Dame Alianore took the opportunity to say, in her harsh voice, with a rough laugh—

"Methinks Sir Walter de Malmayns and the Damoiselle de Cheyne be about to eat out of the same dish."

The last few words had grown into a popular saying, referring to the common practice of the day, but proverbial of close intimacy and friendship; and they were designed to make the two uncomfortable, to say the least. But Gytha's dignified lack of self-consciousness stood her in good stead, and Sir Walter immediately answered—

"I thank ye, madame, for your suggestion. That will we of a surety, if the damoiselle agreeth thereto."

Dame Alianore scowled, but said no more, and dinner proceeded smoothly thenceforward. In many respects it was served as the dinners at Coulyng Castle were wont to be served. But the reckless extravagance and unbounded profuseness far surpassed anything ever beheld there.

even at the richest banquets. Other points of difference also showed as the meal advanced. The conversation was of a more coarse and unprincipled nature : while damoiselles vied with damoiseaux in the utterance of jests and gabs which no true Lollard had permitted ; and, later in the feast, songs were sung by the minstrels in the gallery, which would not have been heard in a Lollard household. Drinking too went on freely, and here and there rough fun threatened to become something more serious than fun.

This was towards the end of the banquet. Course after course was first brought in. Then came the clearing away of table-cloths, and the laying of fresh ones for the course of *entremets*. A magnificent snowy swan, dressed whole in its feathers, with gilded feet and beak, formed the centre dish at the upper table ; and a peacock and two pheasants in like style, adorned the three lower ones.

“ Methinks ‘tis a grand and queenly bird,” Sir Walter de Malmayns observed to Gytha, whom he found somewhat difficult to draw into conversation, “and deserving of a better fate.”

“ Ay, soothly. Sir Walter, I would fain know by what name is cleped yonder gentle maiden, who doth smile with such innocent enjoyment upon the scene.”

Sir Walter smiled too, well pleased.

“ Methinks ye do display discernment, Madame Cheyne. Yonder maiden is even cleped Eva de Malmayns.”

“ Thine own sister !” She glanced up involuntarily, and caught at once the look of strong resemblance in sunny blue eyes and sweet-tempered lips, though the girlish timidity in the sister was exchanged for manly force in the brother. “ ‘Twas a needless question. Ye do both carry your kinship in your faces.”

“ Albeit, mayhap I profess not the like of her innocent

enjoyment," said Sir Walter merrily. "But 'tis truly a brave spectacle. How think ye?"

"Forsooth, and would I rather be in the soler a-reading—"

She broke off; but he made a half-alarmed gesture, much as an eighteenth-century gentleman would have done on the discovery of an avowed blue-stocking.

"*Thou* would'st sooner be a-reading, madame."

"Ay, verily," she answered.

"*Thou!*" he repeated incredulously. "Nay, of a surety, 'tis for clergy and clerks, and aged dames who be past their prime and their beauty, for to betake them unto reading of books."

Gytha changed the conversation suddenly.

"Sir Walter, I prythee," she said in a low tone, "can'st thou tell me aught concerning the Dame Margaret of Cobham?"

He shook his head, but did not reply.

"I do see her nowhere, though I have sought her face on all sides. And well I wot that were she here she would give me loving welcome. Canst tell me where they have sent or have taken her, Sir Walter?"

He bent his head, and breathed out an almost inaudible answer—

"In hearing of Master Scrope—now so near—'twere best not pursue thine inquiries, fair maiden. I wis not where she may be, neither wotteth Eva. 'Tis sore grief unto her; but the name whereof thou speakest do no men utter longer in this household."

Gytha sat like one stunned, with a rushing sound in her ears, and blank horror at her heart. For a brief space she almost lost consciousness of her own position, amidst the throng of terrible conjectures which chased one another through her mind. In all her fears for Margaret she had

never looked for this. Something of fuller realization of her own helpless perilous condition flashed across her, and between the two she grew sick and faint. Sir Walter suddenly touched her, speaking low and earnestly—

“ Madame Cheyne, I beseech thee carry not thy trouble thus in thy visage. Master Scrope watcheth thee constantly, as doth a cat a mouse. He will e'en suspect within himself the subject of our converse.”

“ Mayhap 'tis that he knoweth me to partake of Margaret de Cobham her Lollardy,” muttered Gytha, hardly knowing what she said.

“ Madame ! Madame ! I pryythee speak not yon name in presence of so many,” pleaded Sir Walter with increasing anxiety. “ For thine own sake I beseech thee, gentle maiden. See here ; how deemest thou concerning the beauteous carving of yonder goblet ?”

And with or without her will, he resolutely drew her into light conversation, though instinctively avoiding on his part aught in the way of jest or language, which might have offended her ears.

Meantime the meal went on ; and when eating was over, there came into the hall a party of jongleurs, to perform mountebank feats, acting, and somersaults, for the entertainment of the company. Childish tricks were displayed, and coarse songs were sung, at all of which the assembly showed equal delight. At length when the ladies were so far satisfied with their share of the entertainment, they retired to the withdrawing-room. But carousing still went on amidst the knights and squires, and sound of fast and furious fun became soon exchanged for sounds of fierce dispute and contention. The Cobham ladies were disposed to be alarmed, but Dame Alianore took the matter very coolly. A fray was almost a necessary conclusion to a feast, in her experience.

CHAPTER XXV.

FURTHER DOINGS.

THE fray if sharp was brief, and the knights began thereafter to find their way into the withdrawing-room, many bearing visible tokens in cuts or bruises of their share in the late conflict. Sir Walter de Malmayns came in among the number, having a scarf wrapped carelessly round his left arm, and a smile upon his lips, though he carried so white a face as to cause somewhat of a sensation. The ladies were eager to know the reason of the fray, each being well aware that her own name might have been implicated. Gytha alone stood silently back, while Eva pressed eagerly forward to her brother's side.

"An ye do desire to be made acquaint with the cause, ye had best ask Sir Walter," observed Sir Reginald moodily.

"Nay, Sir Reginald," was the courteous but firm answer: "thou wittest right well I had struck no blow save in self-defence. Verily with lance or sword, and unto the death, in court or in castle, would I right joyously maintain the beauty of the fairest of earth's maidens, in face of whatsoever odds. But I do deem it small honour for to drag the name of a gentle damoiselle into a banquet brawl; neither had I done so of mine own free will; neither had I pursued the matter, but that ye did all force me thereto. But in matter of blows I did but strike in mine own just defence."

"Methinks the fairest of earth's maidens had best give you the guerdon ye do merit, Sir Walter," said Dame Alianore, with her harsh laugh.

"No guerdon do I claim," responded Sir Walter haughtily. And crossing the room, he knelt suddenly on one knee before Gytha. "Fair maiden, I prythee pardon me, for that I the unwilling means have been to drag thy name to the unseemly level of a banquet fray."

It had never entered Gytha's wildest imaginings that she herself could be the maiden under discussion, but on looking up she found herself the cynosure of every eye. For one moment her head swam. The next she spoke with tolerable steadiness.

"I pray thee, rise, Sir Walter. Thou hast wounded thine hand."

"Fair maiden, be I forgiven?" persisted Sir Walter, maintaining his position, and looking up at her, in true knightly style, as if she had been a being of a superior order.

"Of a surety, aye," said Gytha hurriedly. "I pray thee, rise, Sir Walter, and kneel not to me again."

Sir Walter complied slowly, but stood before her still, and Eva broke out pitifully :

"O Walter, thou art soothly sore wounded. See—the blood soaketh through the scarf. O Walter, wilt thou not have it tended?"

"'Tis nought, save only that one did fling towards me a bowl of strangely keen edge. Nay, not thou, Eva. An the Damoiselle de Cheyne will bind me up, well; otherwise will I go untended."

As the quickest mode of settling the matter, and, it must be confessed, not without a certain measure of pleasurable excitement, Gytha removed the scarf from his hand. She had been well trained in the matter of bandages, and showed no alarm at the sight of the

injury. The scarf evidently would not do again, so she pulled hastily off her own white neckerchief, with which to stanch the flow of blood. Sir Walter submitted without a word till she had done, and then muttered—"I thank thee, gentle damoiselle. 'Twill be henceforth my dearest earthly treasure."

Banquet, mummeries, and fray having run their course, dancing now set in, for such of the company as were in a fit state for the amusement. Gytha declined to join, but Sir Walter, immediately following her example, gave himself up to her society for the remainder of the evening. And Gytha, fascinated as she had never in her life been before, had likewise never in her life before looked so lovely. It mattered not that her dress was serge, while every dame around, except Lady Joan and her daughter, shone resplendent in silks and velvets and sparkling gems. The very plainness of her attire only served as a foil to her brilliant beauty.

Lady Joan, accustomed as she was to see her admired, watched her in amazement. For Gytha herself seemed to have laid aside the retiring gentleness and positive dislike to attentions which she had hitherto shown. She went to and fro like a queen among her subjects, her soft grey eyes radiant with excitement, and her whole face shining with smiles. Scarcely a maiden in the room was there who did not grow fiercely jealous at the abstracted attention of her knight or squire, and scarcely a knight or squire was there who would not gladly have changed places with Sir Walter. Gytha did not measure her own power, but she felt it; and for once, under the intoxicating effects of this night's new and undefined sensations, she gave full rein to it.

So time went on, and not till the unwonted and extravagantly late hour of one o'clock, did the company break

up and retire to rest. Gytha was shown to one of the chambrières' sleeping-rooms, where, rather to her disappointment, Eva de Malmayns was not of the number. No particular welcome was accorded to her by the other chambrières. They could not forgive her for her attractions, and crowded together, all apart from her, eagerly discussing the events of the past banquet, as they made ready for sleep.

Gytha, once more alone and neglected, sat down upon her coffer, at the foot of her bed, with her loosened hair falling round her. At first her mind was full of eager excitement and pleasure, while the scenes of the evening floated before her eyes, and the words of Sir Walter rang in her ears. But gradually a weight of weary stillness settled down upon her heart. Even the thought of Sir Walter de Malmayns, and his devotion, died away to nothing at this moment, before the stern and solemn question which presented itself.

"What have I—even I—Gytha Cheyne—a Lollard—a follower of Christ—what have I done this night? How might men know, from what I did say and do, the religion which I do profess? Nay, in no wise have I honoured my Master, nor letted men to wete that I did belong unto Him."

In no wise whatever! She had excelled in gaiety and in seeking for applause, amid all that gay and admiration-seeking throng. It had not indeed been needful for her recklessly to rush into danger, or to draw persecution upon herself, by openly proclaiming her opinions until they were called for. But simply to abstain from a premature outspoken confession of her belief, and deliberately to act in a character altogether inconsistent with her principles, were two totally different matters. She had given her whole heart and soul this evening to win-

ning attention to herself—and she had succeeded in her aim. But what of her Master's honour?

Ready for persecution! Ready for prison! Ready for death! Aye, truly she had felt herself so. And had Master Scrope, on her first arrival, led her from the banquet to the stake, she had doubtless gone with a smile upon her lips and fearless confidence at her heart. But temptation of the description which had now come upon her was another matter altogether, and like a reed in a hurricane her strength had gone down before it.

She felt this to be the case. She knew she had failed. And yet—she was in no mind for drawing back. She had sipped a cup of brilliant earthly happiness—only earthly!—but she thirsted eagerly for more. She told herself that all in the castle knew her to be a Lollard, and that to force the subject on others' attention by either words or manner would be needless danger. Twenty-four hours back she had not reasoned thus. Nor would she have done so now, if for one moment she had realised the deeper danger of allowing an idol to rise up between her God and her own soul—aye, verily an idol, for upon this new joy she could not ask His blessing.

Restless and self-dissatisfied, yet with a glow of feverish excitement still upon her, she went to bed. Lying there in the dark, it came into her head suddenly how small a portion of her thoughts that evening had been given to Margaret. Conscience pricked her sharply, and she called herself cruel and selfish and heartless. But even then, while tears of repentance filled her eyes, the image of Walter de Malmayns came gliding insidiously between, and it was with a smile upon her lips that she fell asleep.

The household was lazy next morning, many not turning out of bed till the unconscionably late hour of "prime large," or six o'clock. Since the passing of the strict

law against Wickliffe's translation, Gytha no longer dared to bring out her Gospels in view of any but Lollards, lest they should be taken from her. She kept them carefully locked up, and studied them only when alone. Down in her heart of hearts there was something of a sensation of relief, that reading on this morning was out of the question. She did not omit to kneel down, but her prayers were cold and wandering, and she was glad to rise, and to make her way to the chamber of the Lady Joan de Cobham.

"Art rested this morn?" was the latter's greeting, as she touched Gytha's cheek. "Thou art somewhat pale, child, and hast lost thy roses of yestere'en. But soothly thou didst shine bravely in the company."

Gytha looked down, but did not speak.

"Dost deem Sir Walter of a nobler and more knightly nature than base-spirited Master Arnold Savage? Ah, ha, my Gytha—think'st thou the truth be not plain unto mine e'en?"

"Madame—soothly"—faltered Gytha.

"Nay, blush not. 'Tis what I did desire for thee. It pleaseth me well, Gytha. But to another and sadder matter. What deem'st thou concerning our Margaret—bright Margaret, as we did clepe her in days gone by?"

"Verily, madame, I wis not what can have happed unto her."

"Didst thou inquire nought concerning her yestere'en, Gytha?" asked Dame Joan a little wonderingly.

"I did seek to learn, madame—but—he—did warn me not to speak her name."

"Methinks he had reason. One word I did put to my cousin, Dame Alianore, but her eyes did flame with such anger that I did lack courage for to say more, neither gave she me aught of reply."

"I would fain know all we might learn," said Gytha after a little pause. "How think'st thou, an we did question Eva de Malmayns?"

She said the name without thinking, and coloured crimson at the lady's amused look.

"Madame, 'tis but that Sir Walter did assure me the Damoiselle Eva grieved much for our Margaret," said Gytha soberly.

"'Tis well thought. Seek her, and bring her unto me forthwith, my Gytha."

Gytha obeyed, and with some difficulty, by dint of many inquiries, succeeded in her search. She came back at length, with the little blue-eyed chambrière by her side, and found Lady Cobham still alone.

"So thou art Eva de Malmayns," said the latter in her gracious way. "Seat thee here, my damoiselle, and let us become acquaint. Hast thou dwelt of long time in this castle?"

"But one year," faltered Eva, tears coming to her eyes. "I be but sixteen of age, madame, and do long for mine own home. Ah, but 'tis joy to see Walter once again."

"Methinks Gytha did grieve like unto thee when she was likewise of thine age, and had left her home for to abide with me," said Lady Cobham. "But lest we be interrupted, I would fain put to thee a question, and that without delay. 'Tis concerning my chambrière, the Damoiselle Margaret de Cobham."

Eva involuntarily cast a fearful glance round. "Madame, the Dame Alianore loveth not that we do speak her name."

"I will take heed that the Dame Alianore heareth nought of this our converse. Tell me aught concerning her."

"Truly, madame, I could tell ye much—save that I

do fear," faltered Eva. "But 'twill be verily safe with ye?"

"Thou need'st not doubt. I will pay good heed, and Gytha likewise, that we bring thee not into trouble."

Eva de Malmayns sat looking thoughtfully at the tapestryed wall.

"I did greatly love her, from the day of her first coming with Sir Reginald," she broke out suddenly at length. "'Twas scant motherly greeting which she did receive from our lady, but never angered in any wise was Margaret. Ever quiet and mild was she, and gave none offence to any man, save that when Master Scrope did bid her to confession, she made answer that his assoilment needed she not—for that verily God Himself had assoiled her. Doubtless 'twas heresy, yet methinks Master Scrope found him oftentimes at a loss how for to answer her. Also she did refuse to attend the mass, albeit so gently that they at the first did deem her easy of being persuaded."

"Methinks they kenned not Margaret," muttered Lady Cobham.

"Mayhap nay, madame. For weeks did pass, and in no wise was she convinced of her errors, but did firmly as ever resist. Whereat the Dame Alianore began for to grow mightily angered, and to exercise her wrath upon Margaret in divers cuffs and blows—the which Margaret did receive full meekly. I did marvel oft to behold her. 'Twas said she had not been of a like spirit in days past."

"Verily, no," said Lady Cobham. "No man in years past had cledep Margaret de Cobham meek nor gentle."

"Never otherwise did I ken her, madame," said Eva. "Awhile it did thus continue, and then of a sudden matters did come unto a point. Our dame would have Margaret for to attend mass, and Margaret ne would not

in any wise. She did question her each day, and grow each day more wrathful. At the last one day she struck Margaret full heavily, with warnings for the morrow; and she dared yet again to disobey. And at supper—'twas the last supper her face showed ever amongst us"—Eva sobbed a little as she spoke—"Margaret was pale and gentle, and spoke never a word of ruth, albeit many fierce and scornful words were flung upon her. And when morning came she went not unto the mass, but when I was a-starting, she came up, and took me by the hand, and did say tenderly—'Kiss me, Eva, for I wis not when I will behold thee again.' Then I did cling to her in fear, but she put me off, and smiled farewell. And when we did come back, truly Margaret was to be seen nowhere—neither saw we her thereafter any more."

"Did none dare ask concerning her, Dameoiselle Eva?" asked Lady Cobham.

"Nay, madame—save, unwitting, a question at the first maybe, which did receive rough and speedy silencing. Wheresoever she be, doubtless the Dame Alianore and Master Scrope do right well ken. But others of the household know nought, or do dare nought to tell."

"Sir Reginald wotteth all, of a certainty," said Lady Cobham. "And albeit he hath of late grown somewhat stern, yet I deem not he would will that aught of ill should hap unto her. Methinks 'tis like they be trying for to subdue her spirit, and for to save her from out the hands of them who would even do her unto death, and that shortly."

Both Gytha and Eva caught eagerly at this suggested explanation, and persuaded themselves that it was possibly—probably—nay, almost certainly, the true one. No mother or brother could wish one whom they loved, however heretical her views in their opinion, to be brought

to the stake. Doubtless they felt sure that if they did not act themselves, somebody else would do so, and therefore they prudently preferred to keep the matter in their own hands.

But *could* they keep it in their own hands, with Master Scrope standing complacently by? The explanation was a comforting one, so far as it went ; but it rested on very slight grounds.

Whatever Master Scrope's secret intentions might have been respecting Margaret de Cobham, he had at all events no designs to make a martyr at present of Gytha Cheyne. The keen intuition of the man had already set him off upon quite another scent. He had divined the new weak point in Gytha's armour before she had divined it herself. Sir Walter de Malmayns was a conscientious simple-minded Roman Catholic, and might be used as an excellent bait in the hand of the subtle priest. Not that a Lollard wife was what Master Scrope would in any wise have desired or tolerated for a member of his flock. But he knew right well—none better than he—what he was about.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE LITTLE OLD MANOR.

ON one of the first days of early spring-time, Dame Cheyne had arisen from the supper-table, and was about to retire into the back chamber behind the hall. The past few years had not dealt ungently with her, though the weight of much trouble and anxiety had somewhat creased her smooth brow, and drawn grey lines in the brown hair—little of which was permitted to be seen.

“Anne Tufton, I desire for to speak with thee awhile hence,” she said.

There was evidently some secret understanding between the two. Mistress Tufton’s black eyes twinkled comprehensively, and she nodded her head.

“Certes I will be speedy, my dame, and come unto ye.”

“When think’st thou, Anne, Sir William will return unto me?”

A sorrowful little smile quivered over the poor lady’s lips. She had been waiting now so long, so very long, for the arrival of her husband and children. A dark fear had begun to find entrance at her heart, replacing the joyous expectation which had first reigned there, as day after day went by and still they never came.

“Mayhap this very eve, madame,” said Anne Tufton encouragingly. “What wot we? An hundred matters of delay have doubtless hindered them upon their jour-

ney. I doubt not God will bring them unto ye again in safety."

"Ah, 'tis not that I do misdoubt His goodness," faltered Dame Cheyne. "But thou wittest well, Anne, He doth once and again see fit for to send sorrow upon them whom He loveth. Thou wittest right well."

"Aye, do I. And if the sorrow cometh, it should be took from His hand with nought of repining thereat. But, my dame, the sorrow hath not come. And albeit God hath behight* strength in measure for the trouble which He doth send, methinks I ken none behest† in the Gospels of strength for to be sent beforehand, ere and it be needed."

"Whiles methinks it cometh even thus," said Lady Cheyne. "But thou art wise and art right, for 'tis not thus behight. I will e'en strive for to wait with more of a patient spirit."

She quietly made her way into the back chamber, and, closing the door, took out her heavy manuscript translation of the Bible. With the great book resting on her knee, she read on, verse after verse, forming the words softly with her lips, and never lifting her intent grey eyes, till the look of trouble in them gradually gave place to an expression of abounding peace. Lonely and heart-sore she had come to the sacred volume, but the very strength which she wanted she there found; and it was with her brightest smile that she presently greeted Anne Tufton.

"Dost desire a word of comfort, Anne?" she asked eagerly. "List here unto these words of holy love—'And what euere thing ye schulen axe the Fadir in my name, I schal do this thing that the Fadir be glorified in the Sone. If ye schulen axe ony thing in my name, I

* Promised.

† Promise.

schal do it. If ye louen me, kepe ye my commandementis.'"

"Need be, verily, in these days, that we do trust unto such words, sith in man, neither prince, neither priest, we may ne trust not. Madame, I would fain list thee longer, but there be one a-waiting who will be hungered. What will ye I should carry unto him?"

"The best thou canst gather. Albeit thou must beware—beware—Anne—that none do suspect."

"I will guard well that none do have reason for to suspect. I do ken right well the need for caution, albeit none here be of a mind for to betray any such. Wilt thou then that I should gather in a basket that which he needeth, and bring it hither again unto thee?"

Dame Cheyne signified her assent, and Anne Tufton went back into the hall. Just at that moment there was the sound of a stir, and an eager shout of welcome from men and maidens of the household. Anne Tufton came rushing back into the chamber, with her plump face crimson, and her hood all awry.

"My dame—my dame—they be come—they be come."

Lady Cheyne hastened into the hall, with trembling eager steps. Sir William's arms closed round her for one moment in silent greeting, and then she stood back, clasping his mailed hands tightly, and asking—

"Where be my children, Sir William—where be they?"

"Sweetheart, 'twill disappoint thee somewhat, I fear me. Gytha attendeth her lady unto Sterborough Castle, but awhile hence the two will journey hitherward."

Lady Cheyne looked terrified. "Unto Sterborough Castle! Of a surety—deemest thou 'tis safe?" she faltered.

Sir William was glad to be spared the need of answering, for at that moment a litter was borne slowly in by two men, and placed upon the ground.

A sob escaped Lady Cheyne's lips. "Alfgar—mine Alfgar—oh, 'tis not he!"

"Didst not ken he had been wounded and sore sick, my dame?" asked Sir William gently.

She knelt silently beside the litter, and drew aside the light sheltering cover, which had been devised by loving hands to guard the sufferer from wind or sunshine. She would hardly have recognised the colourless blue-veined face below, but for the grey eyes which wearily opened and looked up.

"Mother!" It was hardly joy in the tone, but only the confiding appeal of a worn-out child, and his wasted fingers closed round hers convulsively. "O mother—the journey hath been sorely long."

"'Tis over now, sweetheart, and thou shalt rest," she said in her calm tones, sweet and tender as of old, only slightly tremulous.

"He hath been long and grievously sick," said Sir William gravely, in answer to his wife's anxious look. "I wot not wherefore he mended never since he did receive the wound, neither wotteth the Cobham leech. Methinks ye may do more for him with your potions and your tending, fair dame and Mistress Tufton. But the journey hath been heavy for his utter weakness, and whiles I have feared I would scarce bring him unto thee in safety. Oft I did need to delay for many days upon the road, such was his extremity of feebleness."

"'Tis wherefore thou hast been thus tardy of arriving. But I had none letter, Sir William, save one writ early in November, which did speak full lightly of the wound, and I deemed not but that he should be fully recovered ere this. Ah, 'tis sore to see him thus."

She leant down to kiss her child's brow, but there was no response, and Sir William said—"He hath swooned

methinks. Fear not, sweetheart. I do even hope he will now speedily mend, in thy loving care. Bring ye the litter hither, my men."

Alfgar was carried into the back chamber, and laid upon the bed, with the red curtains drawn back to allow the entrance of a breath of air. Sir William stood in his heavy armour, looking on, while the lady and Anne busied themselves with such simple remedies as they possessed, till the fainting at length gave place to a deep sleep of exhaustion. And then Anne Tufton exclaimed, with a start of recollection—"Methinks 'tis time I do go—my dame, we be even forgetting——"

"Verily, aye," said Lady Cheyne. "Go thou speedily, Anne, and make ready the basket, while I do speak unto Sir William."

"What hast for to tell me, sweetheart?" he asked.

She glanced round to see that the door was shut, and none were within hearing.

"Tidings have I in good sooth," she said softly. "My William, I wotted right well it would be thy pleasure, therefore did I thus act. Lord Cobham lieth hid in the secret chamber."

Sir William nodded approval. "Thou hast done well. Came he and demanded shelter, sweetheart?"

"Aye, that did he—alone and footsore. Mine heart did bleed for to see him, and to think of his former estate. Methinks he will rejoice that thou art here."

"I would fain see and speak with him."

"Awhile hence, after that the household be gone to sleep. None do ken of his presence save Anne Tufton. But he purposeth not to remain long here, Sir William."

"Where purposeth he for to go?"

"He talketh of certain Powis lands in the country of Wales, where saith he a man may hide him right easily

and be never discovered. Also he doth trust somewhat methinks under the protection of Lord Powis—with how much of reason I wis not. But he taketh not any step over hastily."

Mother-like, she could not talk even on the engrossing subject of Sir John Oldcastle, till she had satisfied her mind with respect to her own children. The whole story of Alfgar's wound and long illness had to be explained to her, and then the reasons of Gytha's visit to Sterborough Castle—reasons which by no means satisfied her, though she dutifully submitted to Sir William's decision.

In the same manner did she again yield to his judgment, when Anne Tufton entered the room, basket in hand.

"Thou and I will take it unto him, sweetheart," he said briefly, "while Anne Tufton remaineth for to keep guard in our absence."

She had already given her opinion on the subject, and, finding her advice disregarded, she did not trouble herself to offer it a second time, but simply prepared to obey. Sir William took the precaution of fastening the door securely with his dagger.

"See that none do enter, Mistress Anne," he said briefly, "lest we be missed. If any seek so to do, thou mayst answer that my lady and I desire not yet for to be disturbed."

Anne Tufton took her seat to watch, as requested, with a dogged look of determination on her face. He was well aware that she would be a match for any number of inquisitive visitors. Then crossing the room, and pulling aside a tapestry hanging, he touched a spring in the wall, completely invisible to any eyes save those of the initiated. A low narrow door immediately flew open, and, bending low his head, the knight passed through, after his lady, closing it firmly behind him.

A spiral dusty staircase, of solid stone, and of the narrowest dimensions, unlighted by the tiniest pretence at a window, led upwards. Lady Cheyne had to manage her ascent with care, while Sir William's broad shoulders were obliged to work their passage sideways, and were in no slight danger of becoming a permanent fixture between the two walls. He struggled on, however, till he had reached the highest step but one, with his dame in front of him, close to another tiny door, strongly bound with iron.

She touched the spring herself this time, and entered a small cell-like chamber, not exceeding six feet square, built; as was also the whole staircase, within the massive ancient wall which bounded the manor on this side. Nobody knew how old the wall might be; and none save the heads of the household and Mistress Tufton were acquainted with the secret chamber.

A tiny hole in the roof admitted some faint beams of light. There was a mattress rolled up in one corner, and a coffer completed the furniture. Upon this sat Lord Cobham himself, leaning down sideways as he wrote busily upon a large sheet of paper—the box which served for a seat having to serve also for a table. His armour was lying upon the ground near him, but he wore only a plain grey super-tunic, with black leggings. A certain thinness of figure, and a tracery of deep new lines upon the brow, attested to long and wearing trouble in the past few months; yet he looked up cheerfully at the sound of the opening door, and as Sir William's face appeared his own became bright with pleasure.

"Mine old friend, hast come hither unto me again?" he said, first giving knightly greeting unto the dame, and then meeting his brother-at-arms with outstretched hands and hearty kiss. "Truly it doth rejoice mine heart, after these many years once more to see thee."

"I have seen thee, and with bitter grief, when thou didst not see me," said Sir William.

"I prythee, fair dame, seat thee, and remain not a-standing," said Sir John, offering the coffer. "Thou and I, Sir William, must e'en betake us unto the mattress," and he laughed softly. "Thou didst see me, say'st thou? Aye, thou wert in London at mine examination.* Me-thought I did once behold a face like unto thine in the throng—sorrowful and indignant, as thine would verily have been. But I deemed it but a fantasy, till thy billet was brought unto me privily, after that I had escaped, letting me to wete where I might find thee an I was put to it for a refuge."

"'Twas a sore disappointment unto me, Sir John, that I met thee not there."

"'Twas not needed. Wherefore should I put my friends in peril, for to gain nought? But I prythee, Sir William, seggent concerning others. Hast heard aught of Sir John Beverley, either Sir Roger Acton?"

Sir William looked down on the ground.

"'Tis the worst which I have to tell thee. But three days gone, a post from London, journeying westward with all speed, did overtake me, and bring me much tidings on his way. Prepare thee, my lord—for I ken not in any wise how I may soften that which I have to tell thee."

"Thou hast prepared me. What! think'st thou I ken not the peril in which we all do live?"

"Sir Roger Acton and Sir John Beverley be dead."

"The *two*?"

"They be both dead."

"In what wise?"

"Sir John in the month of January—Sir Roger upon the tenth of February—scarce one month since—were

* Trial.

† Speak.

even carried unto Ficket's Field, at St. Giles', and there were drawn and hanged for treason."

One long deep sigh answered him. Lord Cobham shaded his face with his hand for some minutes, and did not speak.

"Men do say that forasmuch as Sir Roger did die, convict of treason, 'tis therefore proved beyond dispute that the gathering of St. Giles' was treasonable and lawless," said Sir William, after a pause.

"Men do say divers things which be not true," said Lord Cobham, gravely and sadly. "Methinks they do forget the late Act passed, by the which any man, who dareth for to read the Scriptures in his own tongue, is therewith condemned as an heretic unto God, an enemy unto the crown, and most arrant traitor unto the realm. Thou and I be traitors, Sir William. This gentle dame and the fair Gytha be alike traitors, after the said Act."

"Thou speakest sooth," said Sir William briefly.

"Nethless, I doubt me little, Sir Roger his schemes in defence of Lollardy had scarce all borne the light of day. Yet is he a grievous loss"—and Lord Cobham sighed heavily again. "Also Sir John Beverley I did love right well."

"Hast heard br uitings of coming warfare, Sir John?" inquired Sir William, desirous to turn his thoughts elsewhere.

"Of warfare? Nay."

"'Tis said—I wot not with how much of reason—that the king did desire for to take unto his own possession certain of the church lands and wealth, sith he deemeth that the prelates and clergy be over well stocked in earthly goods. I wis not how Master Arundel had evaded this blow, did his hand yet hold the helm——"

"Arundel! What sayest thou?"

"Knowest thou not that Master Arundel be dead?
Nay, verily, of a surety thou canst not it kennēn. But
'tis sooth."

"Ah!" and a sound of deep compassion broke from
Lord Cobham's lips. "God have mercy on his soul!"
he murmured solemnly. "Ill untold hath that man
worked in this unhappy realm."

"I misdoubt that Master Chichely will scarcely set him
to repair the ill. The clergy were mightily feared at the
king his determination. But methinks Master Chichely
be marvellous cunning. First and in all humbleness he
did make offer to the king of all alien priories in the king-
dom—so 'tis said—and then did set himself for to work
upon the king, that he might set him upon recovering the
crown of France unto himself. Wherefore mighty pre-
parations be beginning, and nought is talked of save war
and conquest."

"Aye, and time hath been when King Harry had wel-
comed my sword and my banner," said Lord Cobham
bitterly. "And now I be but an alien and an outlaw."

"For Christ His sake," breathed Lady Cheyne softly.
His face brightened suddenly.

"Soothly and soothly, gentle dame. No cause have I for
to grieve. Sir William, canst give me tidings of my dame?"

The forfeiture of his lands and the flight of his lady to
Sterborough Castle came all as news to his ears. He
heard to the end with quiet gravity, only saying once—

"Methinks it had been wiser an she had travelled
hither. But doubtless she will come ere long."

And then followed inquiries about Alfgar, the answer
to which made him start forward.

"Mine Alfgar—mine own faithful esquire—below stairs?
I must e'en see him without delay."

"Nay, nay, Sir John, I prythee," begged Lady Cheyne in terror. "An thy voice were heard, thy life might pay the forfeit—aye, and other lives likewise," she added, seeing him not convinced. "Also, Alfgar be scarce in a state this night for so great a joy. My lord, ye will delay a while, I beseech ye."

"Thou hast a right for to decide, fair dame," Sir John answered, bending his head. "I will e'en curb mine impatient spirit, and abide thy time. While you do risk thus much in sheltering of me, 'twere a graceless act of mine to put ye to further and needless peril."

CHAPTER XXVII.

AN AWAKENING.

A GRAND joust had just taken place at Sterborough, as the concluding scene of the festivities in honour of Sir Reginald's wedding. Knights and nobles were gathered from far and near, to grace the display with their presence, or to make trial of their skill.

Heralds and trumpeters, proclamations and largesse, gorgeous apparel and glittering jewels, palisades and tents, shields and armour, horses meeting in terrific shock and horsemen rolling in the dust, shivered lances and enthusiastic acclamations, display of ladies' colours and bestowal of fair dames' approval, crowds of spectators and wild excitement—these things were the order of the day while the joust lasted.

It was over now—this dangerous play, with its barren honours and its dazzling show. Among all the knights and nobles of skill and gallant chivalry, Sir Walter de Malmayns had carried off the palm. Nobody had expected it of him, yet his was no doubtful triumph. By unanimous consent he was pronounced far ahead of all competitors, and was conducted to the feet of the lovely girl enthroned as Queen of Beauty, there to lay his laurels, and to receive the golden circlet which was his prize for the valour he had shown. To Gytha Cheyne, seated there in a dress of silver tissue, with a blue and ermine-

lined mantle flowing from her shoulders, and her long hair falling gracefully round her, confined only by the silver coronet which she bore as ensign of her brief royalty—to Gytha this was but the crowning-point of long weeks of delirious excitement and pleasure. She looked so radiantly fair that day, that not a dissentient voice had been heard at her election to the post of Queen. Yet down in Gytha's heart lay a deep void of utter dreariness and passionate remorse, into which she dared not even look. She had lived an absolutely *outside* life of late, permitting herself no leisure for thought.

But the joust and the banquet were over now, and many guests had departed, and the rest were retiring for the night. And in a certain upstairs chamber a conference was going on, strangely in contrast with the jovial hilarity of the past day. None but Master Scrope would have devised such an hour for such a conference; but Master Scrope always had his reasons for what he did. He preferred to strike while the iron was hot.

Dame Alianore sat there, rigid and erect; and Lady Cobham, weary yet excited; and Sir Reginald himself, bearing marks of a heavy fall from his steed, in an encounter with Sir Walter, who by-the-bye had been carefully excluded from this interview. Sir Stephen and the Dame de Malmayns—Sir Walter's father and mother—were also of the number, besides Master Scrope, wearing a face of smooth benignity. And in their front stood Gytha Cheyne, in her glistening robe, at the first with a look of bright bashful girlish happiness, which changed speedily to startled pallor and blank dismay.

For the choice was put before her plainly. Would she give up at once and for ever her heretical views, and wed Sir Walter? The heart's devotion of a noble knight was hers if—but there *was* an if! Not that Sir Walter, or his

parents, or Master Scrope, or anybody present, unless perhaps Lady Cobham, had the slightest doubt as to her answer. The priest rubbed his hands, and laughed pleasantly, as he discussed the matter. She had of course been educated in Lollardy, and Coulyng Castle had fostered that which had been begun in her own home. She had done much harm too, before now, by her prating on such matters. But they were willing to pass over all that was past, if she would consent to lay aside anything of heresy that yet clung to her. After all, her Lollardy had been of such light texture that it would scarcely be missed. As Sir Walter de Malmayns' wife, it was absolutely essential that she should be a good Catholic.

Her white dismayed look was the first thing which made them realise the possibility of anything like opposition. They had not expected it hitherto. Dame Alianore took the lead, and spoke roughly, but obtained no answer whatever. Lady Cobham tried a little gentle persuasiveness, alluding to the danger of Lollard views, and the necessity for care. She did little good to their cause by such words. They only brought back for a moment a gleam of the old fearless spirit, which had once been Gytha's in the defence of Christ's religion.

But the sudden flash passed, and the girl's uplifted head sank again, when the Dame de Malmayns spoke of her son's deep love, and of how he would sooner wed Gytha than any one in the whole world. Aye, and how he doubtless *would* do so, in face of all or any opposition, except the terrible stumbling-block of heresy. But he was too faithful a son of the Church to be united to one who was the Church's avowed enemy. Neither would his parents consent to his taking a wife, who might reasonably expect to end her life in the flames. Sir Stephen joined in sternly here, with his unalterable determination rather

to disinherit and utterly cast off his son than to allow any such marriage. Then the dame more gently showed how they were both well disposed to love this maiden—her Walter's choice. Only one little difficulty to be made smooth ! Such a little matter ! And none could have seen the Damoiselle de Cheyne the past few weeks, and have doubted that her Lollardy was mere matter of education and of form.

"O nay—nay—I beseech ye, madame !" cried Gytha, in sudden agony at this accusation. But they saw the effect of the words, and pressed them resolutely. Master Scrope and Sir Reginald carried on the thought, and even Lady Cobham joined in.

Why what had she done to make them think otherwise ? Had she spoken concerning her opinions ? Had she been seen to read any of Wickliffe's writings ? Had she shown any distinctive signs of Lollardy whatever, in words, or dress, or demeanour ? True she had not been present at the mass, but this they had ascribed to old and evil habits of neglect. It was a point that must be mended immediately. True, she had appeared at Cou-lyng Castle to be a sincere Lollard ; but then that was a Lollard household. She had fitted in scarcely less easily here with the ways of a Catholic household.

Gytha's white lips uttered a faint protest, but they went on mercilessly, making the very utmost of her dereliction, which at the best was sad enough. "If she *were* truly Lollard in heart and soul, how had she ever dared in common honour to encourage the addresses of so sincere a Catholic as Sir Walter ? Could she ever seriously have supposed that his friends would consent to his having, or that he would desire to have, a heretic dame ? Was she thinking of the example of Sir John Oldcastle and Lady Cobham ? How had *that* answered ? He an outlaw, with

a price set upon his head ; she a destitute homeless wanderer. No ; Sir Walter should take warning, or his friends would take warning for him."

Gytha Cheyne must make her choice then and there. If she loved Sir Walter, then let her have him, and discard her heresy. If she loved her Lollardy—such as it was—better than Sir Walter, then let her keep it, and look well to herself for the peril in which she would stand, and bid farewell for ever to that faithful and chivalrous heart.

In her first despairing bewilderment, Gytha almost yielded, almost made the exchange they asked. For her love for her Master had chilled and sunk into the background, and her love for Walter de Malmayns was intense and passionate and all-absorbing. But she resisted the first impulse so far as to falter a faint request for a reprieve. She could not answer *then*. They would have insisted, but Sir Reginald interposed. In common courtesy a few hours for consideration ought to be permitted. Let her at least have until the morrow—if only until the morning. That small concession could hardly be denied her.

Somewhat unwillingly Master Scrope consented to the proposal, and Gytha was coldly told that she might go. She put her hand to her brow, and gazed round her, with a dim bewildered look in the eyes which had shone so brightly all that day.

"I know not whither to go," she muttered.

"To thy bedchamber, damoiselle. What mean'st thou?" asked Lady Alianore.

"I would fain be alone—I pray ye. I needs must think this night," faltered Gytha.

"Thou had'st better be a-sleeping. But thou shalt have thy way," added Dame Alianore, not perceiving in time the priest's countersign, for he by no means desired

long hours of solitary reflection. There was no help for it now however. Dame Alianore took the girl's icy hand, and led her out of the chamber, and along the passage till they reached a tiny bare turret apartment, much like the one in which Alsgar had so long lain ill.

"Will this satisfy thee, my damoiselle? Methinks thou wilt be soothly sufficiently undisturbed here, sith none do sleep near to thee. But the most of the chambers be fully occupied. Dost desire aught else?"

"Nay, madame: I thank ye."

"I will desire that one bring thee a candle. An thou art wise thou wilt get thee to sleep, and awake of a better spirit on the morrow, as concerning this matter."

She spoke shortly, though with no unusual severity, and went out closing the door behind her. Gytha stood motionless in the centre of the floor, with the little pallet-bed on one side, and a stray moon-beam creeping through the narrow oilet-window opposite. It fell glistening on her silvery dress, and lighted up the wan still face above. A very statue she might have been, standing there with her soft drapery falling round her, and no movement of feature or muscle perceptible, till one of Dame Alianore's household maidens came in. Then she merely turned her head, desiring the girl to lay down the things she had brought, and to extinguish the candle.

"Will ye see, madame, an I have brought all ye will need for the night?"

"Thou mayest go. I need nought else."

"Madame, want ye not a light?" asked the girl wonderingly.

"Nay; do as I bid thee."

With one long pitying look, the maid obeyed, and then again Gytha was left to her solitary musings.

Alone! Alone in body, and alone in very soul! She

had none to comfort her. No sweet presence of a loved though unseen Master came to cheer her in this bitter hour. In the thick of the battle, wounded, oppressed, and helpless, her shield and her Captain were gone ! Out on the raging sea of life, with a fierce white line of breakers ahead, the ship was rudderless, drifting towards its doom, and the Pilot was not on board. The once safe lamb had wandered out of the fold, and now lay torn and bleeding by the roadside, with the growl of a lion near at hand, and no Shepherd's hand to save. She had forsaken her Lord and Master. She had denied and denied Him, again and again, in all but the spoken word. And now !—

Had He forsaken her ? Or was He looking down tenderly, lovingly, upon His poor weak child—near, though she could not feel Him near—and waiting only the due moment to call her to Himself ? Ah ! she could not see her Captain ; but her Captain knew of her terrible peril—unarmed, unhorsed, and surrounded by foes—and He was hastening to the rescue. The Pilot might be upon the shore, and the ship might be near the breakers ; but let one cry for help from the mariner be heard, and through blinding tempest and furious billows the Pilot would be in time. And already the loving unwearying Shepherd was wandering patiently to and fro, seeking His lost lamb, and wanting but one feeble moan for help, to guide Him to the spot where she lay.

But she knew nothing of all this. She only knew how utterly hopeless and heartsick and desolate she felt. At first her whole heart was wrung with anguish at the thought of turning from Walter de Malmayns, for his sake as well as for her own. But gradually it seemed as if this great grief grew puny, and became dwarfed, and shrank almost to nothing, before another tide of strong and overwhelming agony which swept in a mighty torrent over her soul.

For she had denied her Master ! She—Gytha Cheyne—who had seemed so strong, so ready to go to the stake, so willing to suffer death—she had deliberately day by day denied and dishonoured that holy Name ; not from timid fear and shrinking, which might have been her one excuse, but for the sake of an earthly love. What was Margaret Cobham's denial to hers ? Why, Margaret had been but a young and undecided believer, just feeling her way to the truth, while Gytha had for years known and walked with this Master, whom now, on the first temptation, she had lightly given up.

She saw her sin at last, in all its terrible loathsome blackness, and beneath the load she sank, crushed and despairing, to the ground. Down there upon the cold stone, with her rich attire falling in careless heaps around her, she lay prostrate, shuddering deeply from time to time. Once she sat up, tore the silver circlet from her head, and dashed it fiercely away.

"HE did wear a bitter crown of thorns for me !" she muttered hoarsely. "And I—I have borne nought for Him. Ah ! He hath left me now, for ever and for ever. No cry of mine may ever call Him back. O Christ Jesu, my Lord :" and she rocked passionately to and fro, then flung herself prone again, with heaving tearless sobs. "Ah, these vile lips be unworthy for to utter that holy Name ! O would I might lie at His feet—beneath the nether dust of His feet—for evermore—so I might but crawl near enough to receive one touch of pardon. None pardon for me, I wis right well. Too deeply and blackly have I sinned. I have forsaken Him, and He for ever hath forsaken me." And in her despair of heavenly comfort a wild desire for Margaret took possession of her, and again and again the name broke from her lips, which would not utter the higher and dearer and holier Name.

A hand was laid suddenly on her shoulder, and a voice said—

“Madame Gytha Cheyne, do ye in good sooth thus grieve for the Damoiselle Margaret?”

Gytha lifted her eyes to the familiar face of a certain old household retainer, with whom she had exchanged a few words occasionally. It was a dark hard-lined countenance within the rough brown hood, yet certain signs were visible there of a tender heart below.

“Ye be grieving sorely this night, my damoiselle. ‘Twas the sound of your bitter moans and cries which did cause me to enter; and if ‘tis soothly on account of her——”

“Wittest thou aught concerning Margaret de Cobham?” asked Gytha huskily, pushing back her long hair from her face.

“Canst thou well guard a secret, my damoiselle?”

“If it be needful—aye!”

The woman stood looking at her silently. Gytha started to her feet, and grasped the new-comer’s two brown hands in her own.

“Tell of Margaret—oh, bring me unto Margaret!” she pleaded passionately. “Mine heart breaketh—oh, bring me—bring me unto Margaret.”

“Lovest thou the Damoiselle Margaret?” asked the old woman, with a strange expression in her face.

Gytha’s tears came streaming in a sudden torrent.

“Nay, nay, greet* not thus,” said the woman hastily. “I doubt it not, for she loveth thee tenderly: albeit I have marvelled that ye made no effort for to see her hitherto.”

“I kenned not where she might be.”

“Did ye in any wise seek for to discover?”

Gytha hung her head, but murmured,—“Thou wilt bring me unto her, sweet Mistress Dorothy?”

* Weep.

"Verily I did long since promise her for to do mine utmost, but never till to-day did I catch ye alone. The Damoiselle Margaret did assure me ye would oft be a-reading of your books in the soler, and oft have I sought ye thither, but at no time with success. Right glad was I to learn ye would spend this night apart. Mark ye well, my damoiselle, 'tis for love of the gentle Dame Margaret that I do risk this visit of thine to her. An the matter should in any wise become known, my life, and my husband's who keepeth her door by night, should doubtless pay the toll."

"I will sooner die than betray ye," said Gytha firmly.
"Lead on, Mistress Dorothy."

"Nay; thou be'st scarce in guise suitable unto the place whither thou goest. See here, my damoiselle—" and hastily removing the silk mantle, she produced a long dark cloak, which she carefully wrapped round the girl's figure, concluding with the brief command—

"Now follow ye me, my damoiselle; and if ye do value your life, let no sound nor utterance mark your way."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A DUNGEON.

THROUGH several passages, and down many stairs, Gytha trod softly in the rear of her guide. A small lantern, half-shaded by Dorothy's cloak, helped to show them their way through the midnight blackness. Presently the inhabited part of the castle was left behind, and they were descending steep slimy slippery steps, into a damp underground atmosphere. Gytha's breath came quick and short. Could Margaret de Cobham, the high-born delicately-nurtured damoiselle, be spending her days in a place like this?

"Yonder be the dungeons, my damoiselle," whispered the old woman. "Hist—speak not. We be well nigh come thither."

A sharp turn in the passage brought them to another descent of five or six steps. Half-way down sat a man, with a lantern beside him, while a strong fast-closed door was visible at the bottom. He seemed to be nodding slightly in his solitary watch, but the smothered tread of feet made him turn his head. A peculiar soft clucking sound from Dorothy's lips evidently reassured him, and he arose with a yawn.

"Ha! the Damoiselle de Cheyne!" and he scanned the slight cloaked figure which followed his wife; then rubbed his head with a dubious air: "Methinks I be no prudent man for to yield unto thee in this matter."

"Thou may'st put faith in the damoiselle. Soothly she will ne betray not herself neither us."

"I wot not. These Lollards be marvellous fond of fire and stake."

"Ye need not to fear. For your sakes, soothly and soothly will I guard this matter with my life."

It was Gytha who spoke this time, and the steady tone, and the clear eyes which met his, restored at least a measure of confidence.

"Well-a-day!—an it needs must be!—albeit, Dorothy, I do dread thy tongue no little, when thou gettest unto thy confessions with Master Scrope."

"Truly I be of small mind for to confess that which is no sin," said Dorothy readily. "'Tis of a surety a worthy deed for to bring aught of comfort unto one in so evil case as the poor damoiselle—heretic though she be. Cease thy prating, Ralph, and haste thee. Thou dost but make greater by delay aught of risk which we do run. Where be thy keys?"

The heavy bunch was produced, and the right key fitted. Slowly the massive door was swung open. Dorothy half stepped in, then thrust her lamp into Gytha's hand, pushed her over the threshold, and herself drew back. "Ye would doubtless the sooner be alone," she muttered, with real delicacy of feeling; and the next moment Gytha stood within the again shut door.

A shiver ran through her at finding herself thus confined in this dark low dungeon, where the flickering gleam of her lamp only served to make dimly visible the damp floor and bare dreariness. The close oppressive air weighed upon her heavily, and for an instant she could hardly resist the strong impulse which came over her, to cry to Dorothy to be released. But before any sound escaped her lips, she caught sight of a rough mattress in

the nearest corner, and with trembling steps she hastened thither. A jug of water and a bit of hard crust were on the floor beside the bed, and a single ragged blanket was spread over the sleeper lying there.

Margaret de Cobham ! Was it—could it be she ? Gytha's heart gave one great bound, and then almost ceased. Was *this* the terrible tragedy which had been day by day enacted here, down underground, in the very castle, and below the very hall, where the farce and mockery of gay life and love-making, and banquet and mummeries, had been carried on above ?

Margaret—bright Margaret of Coulyng Castle ! Frail as a shadow, and white as marble, with two pale wasted hands folded quietly together, and deep lines drawn by suffering in the hollow cheeks and round the patient lips, —yet with the stamp of a royal Heavenly calm and strong repose upon the brow, such as might mark one whose earthly strife was well-nigh ended,—such was Margaret of Sterborough now ?

No time for grief or weeping. Gytha placed her lantern on the ground and knelt beside it, unconsciously allowing her cloak to fall to the ground, as she softly said—

“ Margaret, mine own Margaret !”

Two dark eyes, larger and more brilliant than Gytha had ever known them, opened suddenly and looked full at her. For a moment the smile which flashed over the awakened sleeper's face was perfectly radiant. She held out both her hands, with an eager—

“ Thou art come ! I am right ready ! Oh, take me.”

“ Margaret, mine own levest,”*—said Gytha, hardly able to speak.

“ Tis Gytha !” and the lifted hands dropped, with a

* Dearest.

look of disappointment. "Soothly I did deem 'twas an angel messenger sent for to call me home."

"And thou carest not for to see me?" asked Gytha, a sense of double desolation creeping into her heart.

"Nay, sweet Gytha, how canst doubt? Second to none but an angel-visitant art thou? Sorely and oft have I longed for to behold thee once again."

Gytha's hand stroked hers softly. Words would not come.

"'Twas thy silver dress, perchance, which did dazzle mine e'en. 'Tis brave attire, my Gytha—yet"—Margaret hesitated a moment, and then asked—"How goeth life with thee of late?"

"How with thee, Margaret?"

A smile played over her lips.

"HE giveth day by day the needed strength. The conflict hath been sore, but methinks the worst be well nigh over. See here, Gytha," and she held up her hand, where every blue vein showed clearly through the white skin. "'Twill not be long—think'st thou?"

"Dost desire for to die, Margaret?"

Margaret looked round the dark dungeon, and then steadily at her friend.

"Verily I desire for to wait patiently my Lord His holy will; yet methinks the dwellings of my Father's House above be somewhat fairer than this mine earthly dwelling, sweetheart."

Gytha pressed her hand over her eyes, but faltered,—
"Hast no dread, Margaret?"

"Nay, methinks none. Much dread have I had concerning them who have sought for to turn me from my faith. But I dread not in any wise Him who loveth—who hath died for me—who will even keep my soul in surety unto the end."

And then after a little silence, during which Gytha's head swam with a confused dull weight of misery, and her lips refused to speak, Margaret said eagerly—

"O Gytha, I do thirst for words of Holy Gospel. 'Tis long since I have heard or read aught from the Holy Book. Nay speak not of aught else, lest we be interrupted; but give unto me somewhat of Heaven's comfort, I beseech thee, sweet Gytha."

Gytha put both hands tightly over her face, with a sense of bitter unworthiness, thus to minister to the suffering child of the Master whom she had dishonoured. But she could not refuse that pleading face, and said in a trembling voice—

"What wilt have?"

"Whatsoever thou canst repeat. They be all my Lord Christ's words."

The last chapter of St. John came into her head first, and after a vain effort to put it aside and to think of something else, she began with that. It was one she well knew by heart.

"Aftirward Jhesu eft schewide him to his disciplis at the see of Tyberias. Sothli he schewide thus. Ther weren to gidere Symount Petre, and Thomas, that is seid Didymes, and Nathanael that was of the Cane of Galilee, and the sones of Zebedee, and tweye othere of his disciplis. Symount Petre seith to hem, I go for to fyche. Thei seyn to hem, and we comen with thee. And they gheden out, and stigheden in to a boot. And in that night thei token nothing.

"Forsoth the morwe maad, Jhesu stood in the brynde: netheless the disciplis knewen not, for it was Jhesu. Therfore Jhesu seith to hem, Children, wher ye han ony soupynge thing? Thei answeriden, Nay. He seide to hem, Send ye the nett in to the right half of the rowyng

and ye schulen fynde. Therfore they senten the nett, and now thei myghten not drawe it for multitude of fyschis. Therfore thilke disciple whom Jesu louede, seide to Petre, It is the Lord.'"

Verse after verse, in a low monotonous tone, Gytha repeated on, till she reached to the fourteenth and fifteenth in the chapter.

"Now this thridde day Jesu is schewid to his disciplis, whanne he hadde rise aghen fro deed men. Therfore whanne thei hadden etyn, Jhesu saith to Symount Petre —Symount of John—louest—louest thou me—more than thes don? He seith to hym—Yhe, Lord—thou wost—for I loue thee.'—"

Gytha struggled on so far, and then broke off, with her face hidden in her hands.

"What grieveth thee, sweetheart?" asked Margaret gently. "Canst remember the day in Coulyng garden, when thou didst utter those words unto me, and bid me take comfort?"

Silence answered; and she said, "Canst repeat unto me the fifteenth chapter of St. John his Gospel, sweetheart?"

Again Gytha began—

"I am a verri vyne, and my fadir is an erthe tilier. Ech syown not berynge fruit in me, he schal do awey it; and ech that berith fruit, he schal purge it, that it more bere fruit. Now ye ben clene, for the word that I haue spokun to you. Dwell ye in me, and I in you; as a braunche may not make fruit of himsilf, no but it schal dwelle in the vyne, so nether ye, no but ye schulen dwelle in me. I am a vyne, ye ben the braunchis. He that dwellith in me, and I in him, this berith moche fruit, for with outen me, ye mown no thing do. If ony man schal not dwelle in me, he schal be sent out as a braunche, and

schal wexe drye ; and thei schulen gadere him, and thei schulen sende him in to the fier, and he brenneth. If ye schulen dwelle in me, and my wordis schulen dwelle in you, what euere thing ye schulen wilne, ye schulen axe and it schal be do to you. In this thing my fadir is clarified, that ye brynge moost fruyt, and ye be maad my disciplis. As my fadir louede me, and I louyde you ; dwelle ye in my loue. If ye schulen kepe my commandementis, ye schulen dwelle in my loue ; as and I have kept the commaundementis of my fadir, and I dwelle in his loue. These thingis I spak to you, that my ioye be in you, and youre ioye be filled."

" 'Tis full joy—right full," murmured Margaret. " And the holy words which do come after I wot well, how that He hath chosen us, and that the world shall hate us, even as it did soothly hate Him. Gytha"—and she laid a hand upon her friend's arm—" hast thou yet, as of old, the full joy of thy Master in thine heart ?"

" Nay," Gytha answered faintly.

" How hast lost it, sweetheart ?"

A deep sigh was the only answer.

" Sweet Gytha, thou and I may in this life meet never again. 'Twere best, methinks, an thou didst tell me all."

" They will not—may not—do thee unto death," muttered Gytha huskily. " They will e'en set thee free."

" I wis not. My mother cometh not for to visit me. Master Scrope hath said, and will change not, than an I go not unto the mass, my feet shall ne cross not yonder threshold never more."

Gytha sobbed sharply once or twice, and Margaret drew her down to a tender embrace.

" 'Tis better thus. One door of exit there be, which he may not bar unto my steps. Methinks our dear Lord, witting that I be weak, hath dealt right tenderly and in

pitying love, in that He hath called me not unto the fiery stake. Yet I deem that He giveth me the honour to witness unto death for His Name, albeit not in such wise. Mayhap e'en yet there be darker woe before me—but 'twill not be long—'twill not be long, sweet Gytha."

"I would I might change with thee in good sooth," said Gytha passionately. And then in a few brief bitter words the sad story of her own failure broke from her. Margaret listened to the end, and simply said—

"Thou wilt not choose Sir Walter."

"O Margaret, I be right sorely tossed and troubled. An I do refuse for to yield, I may look to find me in bitter peril of persecution unto the death ; and—O Margaret!"—with straitened struggling sobs—"how may I meet peril and death alone ? For right justly hath my Lord forsaken me, and forgiveness remaineth not unto one thus fallen."

"Forgiveness remaineth unto all who do seek. Me-thinks thine e'en be strangely darkened, gentle Gytha. Think'st thou there be aught of limit unto our Lord His loving mercy ?"

"I wot not," said Gytha mournfully. "I have utterly lost mine hold upon Him, and do but ken that I be unworthy of His love."

"Mayhap thou hast lost thy hold, but He holdeth thee yet. Mayhap and of a surety thou art not worthy, but He loveth thee yet."

Gytha assented drearily, but had no power to grasp the truth of the words. She felt as if a dark cloud were over her soul, shutting out all hope of pardon and joy for evermore ; and not liking to grieve Margaret, she spoke of something else.

"Dost not desire to hear aught concerning Alfgar, neither Lord Cobham?"

"Aye, verily. Hath Lord Cobham recanted, Gytha?"

"Dost thou believe it of him?"

Margaret's "Nay" was decisive in tone.

"'Twas but a false bruit of them who desired for to blacken his name among his brethren." And then Gytha gave a brief sketch of Sir John's capture and trial and escape, together with Alfgar's wound and long illness. Margaret listened quietly, flushing a little with interest, but simply saying once—

"'Tis good that they do endure manfully. Say unto them that we will one day meet again."

And the serene repose of the gentle face was such that Gytha could not resolve to draw her down to a lower level, by seeking any message of the kind which she knew would alone satisfy Alfgar. It seemed to her that Margaret had already reached the stage when earthly love and earthly desire become as nothing in the light of Heaven's dawning.

Suddenly the door was opened, and Dorothy rushed in.

"Hist!—no word. Master Scrope cometh. Hither, my damoiselle, and delay not!"

Margaret sat up and drew her mantle round her shoulders, with a steadfast gleam in her dark eyes. One moment her hand pressed Gytha's: "HE will e'en forgive thee all!" she said firmly. And then Dorothy had caught up the fallen cloak and extinguished the lamp, and was dragging Gytha by main force out of the dungeon and up the steps. Ralph hastily, though as noiselessly as might be, shut and locked the door, and resumed his air of stolid watchfulness. A dim light was visible along the passage, but Dorothy and Gytha fled in the opposite direction, and speedily found themselves securely hidden by the winding walls of the underground way.

There they rested—each able to hear distinctly the

beating of the other's heart. " "Twas terrible peril," Dorothy muttered. " Not e'en for the gentle damoiselle dare I to risk the same again. What be Master Scrope after this hour of the night ?"

" Oh, I would I were in yonder !" whispered Gytha, as the tread of the priest, with other footsteps following, became distinctly audible ; and words were exchanged in gruff low tones, and the dungeon door was opened and closed again. " Oh, I would I might be with Margaret ! "

" An ye were, 'twere small chance for life which thou or I would have henceforth, my fair damoiselle," replied Dorothy. " Hist—speak not. Now be our time. Softly, and let no sound be heard."

Holding the girl's hand, she glided along in the darkness, feeling her way by the wall. Near the door of Margaret's dungeon they went with extreme caution, but Ralph alone was outside, and he signed to them to make haste. They passed hurriedly though noiselessly on into the darkness, and then never paused till Dorothy had safely threaded her way, with Gytha beside her, through the bewildering passages and staircases, to Gytha's little chamber. How she found her way at all was a marvel, in the utter darkness, but every step seemed familiar to her.

" There be no light here—and the moon be clouded. Thou hadst best hie thee to thy pallet, fair damoiselle, and sleep till the morn. Art comforted by the sight of Dame Margaret ?"

A certain rough kindness was audible in the tones, but she did not wait for an answer, and went away, closing the door behind her. Gytha felt her way to the bed, and sat down upon it.

What was Margaret doing now ? Why was *she* up

here in safety, and Margaret dying a martyr's lingering death in that fearful dungeon ?

" But, O God—my God—Thou wittest I would soothly and gladly change with her—but for to have again the light of Thy love upon my soul !" cried Gytha bitterly aloud, in her solitary watch. " The enemy hath taken me captive, but I do long for to be freed. O Christ, have Thou mercy upon me, and pardon me my sin."

And through the long hours which lasted until the morning light, she sat waiting patiently there, now and then murmuring a word of prayer for herself or for Margaret. She could not bear to lie down or to rest. So she kept her weary vigil, and prayed ; and when morning came she mournfully told herself that her prayers were unheard and unheeded, and that verily her Lord *had* forsaken her. And she did not know that already the answer had come. Peace and comfort might indeed be for a while withheld, in chastening for her sin, but strength was sent her to endure. She doubted no longer as to what her own course should be—and not by her own power had Gytha reached this decision.

CHAPTER XXIX.

VICTORIOUS.

THEY were sitting in conclave, as on the preceding evening—Dame Joan and Dame Alianore, Sir Walter's parents, and the priest. The only addition to the circle was in the person of Sir Walter himself. He was resolute to hear his own fate for himself, and Master Scrope was far too wise a man to strain his tether to the breaking point.

Gytha came and stood before them meekly, with bent head and wearily clasped hands, and no light of joy in her wan face to remind Master Scrope of one, whose smiling peace amid deadly peril had in the midnight past proved a match for all his subtleties and all his terrors. Gytha only looked white and languid and still, while her unchanged silver dress and flowing hair had something almost of a ghastly appearance in the bright morning light.

"Why hast kept this attire, Gytha?" asked Lady Cobham.

Gytha glanced down, and for the first time became aware of the fact. "I pray ye pardon, my dames; but methinks I did forget that which was befitting," she said in a low quiet tone.

"Hast come unto thy proper senses, my damoiselle?" asked Lady Alianore. "Wilt shrive thee unto Master Scrope, and join thee unto holy Mother Church, and wed him who seeketh thee?"

"Hist, hist, madame, I beg of ye," interposed Master

Scrope. “ Damoiselle Gytha Cheyne, make not reckless answer unto this question, for it shall not be put unto thee again. Bethink thee of all which be implied therein. Wilt thou forsake thine errors—renounce thine evil Lollardy—receive that absolution which the Church bestoweth upon the penitent, thus winning entrance into heaven—and thereupon become Sir Walter his chosen and beloved dame, of great and rich possessions, and noble station, and divers friends, and joyous diversions? Or wilt thou rather for ever cast aside a true and faithful knightly heart, and hold thee unto thy deadly errors, which shall but bring thee unto sore poverty and perils and straits in this life, and unto death for ever in the other life which is for to come?”

Gytha lifted her downcast eyes, and spoke steadily : “ Methinks our Lord Christ had even put unto me the choice in other words than these of thine, Master Scrope. HE putteth not poverty in this world and death in the other alongsides, neither wealth and joyance in this life as the surest road into heaven. “ Rather doth He say— ‘ Blessid be ye that hungry now, for ye schulen be fillid. Blessid be ye that wepen now, for ye schulen leyghe. Ye schulen be blessid whanne men schulen hate you, and schulen departe you awey, and schulen putte schenschip on you, and schulen caste out your name as yuel, for mannis sone. Joye ye in herte in that day, and gladde ye with oute forth ; loo ! sothli youre mede is moche in heuene ; forsothe vp these thingis the fadris of hem diden to prophetis. Nethelas woo to you, riche men, that han youre comfort. Woo to you that ben fulfilled, for ye schulen hungry. Woo to you that laughen now, for ye schal morne and wepe ! ’ ”

The soft clear tones went on unfalteringly, and no one attempted to interrupt her. When she had finished, she stood meekly as before, with her head drooping.

"What be we to think of these words, Master Scrope?" asked Lady Alianore sarcastically.

"Methinks the damoiselle hath scarce yet in plain terms made known unto us her mind," said Master Scrope, a sinister gleam appearing in the corners of his eyes. "I will e'en put afore ye the choice in other wise, fair maiden, than I have already done. Will ye travel with Sir Walter unto his fair home, or will ye journey a weary road unto a burning stake?"

"So it please ye, Master Scrope, an there be none other choice, I must e'en journey unto the stake, rather than yet again to deny my Lord."

No hesitation—no weakness—were visible. Master Scrope recognised *now* the lofty and fearless maiden, whom the first evening he had noted and watched upon the dais of the hall. Only her gentle dignity of old was now exchanged for deep and sad humility of mien. And none of them could understand aught of the double change which had passed over her.

"Gytha—silly maiden—art thou mad? Wottest thou not Master Scrope his power?"

It was Lady Joan Cobham who spoke in a half-stifled whisper. Gytha looked towards her instantly.

"Ay, gentle dame, soothly I wot it well. But neither for love of Sir Walter, neither for fear of death, dare I longer to walk as I have walked of late—letting no man to wete of Him whom mine heart doth serve."

She could bear the threatening of the priest's frown—the pity and contempt and anger of the others. But it was harder work when Sir Walter, throwing himself at her feet, poured forth a strain of passionate pleading. She allowed it for a while, because he would not be checked; and then drawing her hand resolutely away, she made answer—

"Sir Walter, I pryythee rise, nor kneel unto me no more. Sorely have I sinned in thus giving heed unto

earthly joys and casting dishonour upon my Lord His Name. Also I do fear me I have deceived thee in somewhat veiling my Lollardy. But I would fain thou didst forgive me, even as I trust my God will likewise do, for Christ His sake."

And then Sir Walter broke out again, and declared he would wed her anyhow—anywhere; he would fight for her—die for her—turn Lppard for her.

"Nay, that canst thou not!" said Gytha firmly, as the others exclaimed, and Master Scrope came a step nearer, brimming with wrath. "Thou shalt not wed a wife, unto whom thy parents would ne consent not, neither whom thou mightest speedily lose by a bitter death. I would not that any man should fight nor suffer for me—thou least of all. And for the matter of Lollardy, 'twere little worth, an thou didst profess to believe that which thou dost not believe, but for my sake alone. I do commend unto thee the Holy Gospels of our Lord Christ, and beseech thee to examine and see whether or no these things be verily as thou hast learned, but in other wise—"

But Master Scrope's hand came with a stern grasp upon her arm, and Sir Walter's mother gave a shriek of alarm, lest her son should be proselytized upon the spot.

"Thou hast taken thy choice, Damoiselle Gytha!"

"Soothly have I so done, Master Scrope."

"Thou may'st get thee again unto thy chamber, where thou hast passed the night."

She turned mutely to obey; but Sir Walter set himself between her and the door, angrily demanding what was to become of her. In his bitter distress he hardly knew what he was doing, and he shook off his mother's hand in somewhat unknightly fashion, and again grasped Gytha's. She looked pleadingly at him with her sad grey eyes, and two tears fell heavily.

"Sir Walter, I pray thee, break not mine heart ; think thou no more of me," she half-whispered. "Farewell—and for ever!"

"I will save thee. Thou shalt not be led to the stake!" he said hurriedly. "Canst trust me, gentle Gytha?"

"Ay, verily. But thou and I be parted now, for aye—for aye!"

And then the priest's own hand dragged back Sir Walter, and hurried Gytha along the passage to the room she had left. Unresistingly she followed where he led, and allowed herself to be thrust roughly into the chamber. Not a word fell from Master Scrope's lips, but his face was dark with wrath. The door was shut and locked, and the heavy steps of her captor passed rapidly out of hearing.

Alone again—utterly alone. Yet somehow the desolation of her heart was lightened, and no weight of fear pressed upon her spirit. Not in Sir Walter was her confidence. She knew he would do his utmost for her, but she believed that utmost to be almost nil. She could see and hear nought of the fierce and stormy interview which followed her departure. She did not know how far Sir Walter would go in his chivalrous defence of her.

It seemed to herself that she stood in a narrow lane, with a wall on either side, and a burning pile at the close, not far ahead. Yet she was very calm. For a while she knelt down by the oilet, not praying so much in words as waiting patiently for some little Heavenly whisper of pardon and rest. It had not come yet—but Gytha was able to look for it now. And then she laid herself down on the pallet-bed, and sank into a deep dreamless slumber.

Hours must have passed before she awoke. There was a pitcher of water beside her, and also a small loaf of dry bread. Gytha thought of Margaret, and a strange thrill

of joy passed through her heart to know that she herself was once again numbered with the persecuted followers of her Lord, rather than banded with His open enemies. She sat up and ate and drank eagerly. Then a little bundle of plain clothes attracted her attention, and she took off her silver dress, and bound up her hair, and felt herself more like the Gytha Cheyne of olden days than she had done for many weeks past.

She could not tell what time in the day it might be, and hours crept by slowly. For a while she walked up and down her narrow apartment, and then she stood at the window and repeated passages of Scripture to herself. And then she found herself sinking into long musings about Sir Walter, and she tried to put him aside and to turn to other matters. But, consider as she might her own prospects, and possibilities for the future, his face came always gliding in between. Nothing but thought about Margaret, and about the highest matters of all, could thoroughly absorb her attention, leaving no room for him. Sometimes there came a rush of bitter remorse over her heart, almost like the terrible self-reproach of the preceding night, before her visit to Margaret. But on the whole, though not joyous in her trouble, she was quite composed, with no mere outward calm.

So that day passed, and the next, and the day after. She was absolutely alone. Once a day Master Scrope himself came to the door, and thrust in a pitcher of water and a loaf of bread, but he exchanged no remarks with his prisoner. Gytha could not understand this mode of proceeding. It was harder to wait patiently through long solitary days, with nothing to employ her time, than it would have been to face actual danger. Yet she felt that this might be just the needed discipline sent to her, and she fought bravely against repining thoughts, and

vain longings for change. Sometimes her heart sank a little at the thought of weeks and months of such a life, which verily might be awaiting her. But the remembrance of Margaret always helped her to endure.

While the trial of her faith seemed beginning, the close of the other tragedy was taking place in the castle dungeon far below. And Lady Alianore and Sir Reginald were in sore grief themselves, though they veiled their feelings from the outer world ; for they had never doubted but that Margaret would yield at last, and they had never dreamt of Master Scrope proceeding to extremities. It came upon them like a thunder-bolt, when he introduced to them,—in a certain mild soft-mannered individual, who had apparently taken advantage of Castle hospitality for a night or two, like any casual traveller—a London Church dignitary, who had journeyed down from the city with full powers to act even unto sentence of death.

The mother and brother sought earnestly then to defend the hapless one, whom they had placed in the professedly tender care of their priestly confessor ; but they found that the matter had passed altogether beyond their reach. The voice of the Church must be obeyed ! Heresy must be rooted out ! Parental and fraternal feelings must now be regarded as a temptation of Satan, and cast aside and trampled upon. No alternative for Margaret but recantation or the stake !

She had already heard this herself in the midnight visit of the priests—had heard it with a calm which no earthly terrors could shake. They had tried their direst threatenings, but without avail. Standing now on the very borderland of heaven, she found, when it came to the point, that it mattered little what manner of passage over the river hers should be, so that only she had the sustaining joy of her Master's love. She quietly acquiesced in that to

which they condemned her, and half-smiled when they urged a recantation. And when they left her, she lay down to rest, wearied out with the double interview. Ralph peeped in, after the unwelcome visitors had gone, and marvelled to see her already asleep.

Many hours later, and not till Gytha's business had been disposed of, did Master Scrope introduce his friend, and make known the steps he had taken, to Dame Alianore and her son. He did not find them easy to manage at first. It was hardly likely that he should. He possessed, however, a goodly armoury of mild persuasions and convincing arguments and direful threatenings. One weapon after another was brought skilfully into use, as each in turn was needed. He wanted simply to bring them to a submissive state of mind, letting them feel how powerless they were themselves to act. And having with some difficulty attained to that point, he by no means objected to grief on their part, since he hoped to make some use of the same. It was long since the dame or her son had visited the poor captive downstairs, for Master Scrope had laid much stress on solitary confinement. But now he himself proposed to conduct them to her side, that motherly and brotherly love and sorrow—albeit none of the tenderest in kind—might strive their utmost to soften her fatal obduracy.

Evening was approaching when matters were thus arranged, and the proposed visit was deferred till the household generally had retired to rest. Then at length they started together, Master Scrope leading the way, lantern in hand, with Dame Alianore and Sir Reginald following after.

Quietly and without conversation they passed through the passages, and descended into the damp unhealthy underground regions. Roger was at his post—not sitting

on the lowest step, but standing near the door, with a wistful uncertain look on his face. Something of relief showed in his countenance at the arrival of the three.

"She hath slept marvellously this day, madam, nor hath cared for to eat aught," he muttered uneasily to Dame Alianore as she passed. "I did open and glance within a while since, but she would in no wise answer unto me when I did speak."

"Hist, Roger. Thy business is but for to keep watch," said Master Scrope sternly; and Roger instantly subsided. The mother and brother and priest passed through the strong low door, and reached the side of the pallet-bed. Master Scrope lifted his lantern slightly, that its rays might fall upon the sleeper.

What was it which made Dame Alianore grow pale as ashes, and Sir Reginald stagger back a pace? For the sleeper—ay, she *was* sleeping!—lay so peacefully there, with one frail hand folded over the other, and a long dark tress of silky hair falling down on either side of the marble-white face, and a soft smile of unutterable happiness parting the gentle lips. Bright Margaret of Cobham in olden days had shown never a look so sweet or so fair.

Ay, she was sleeping; but it was a sleep from which no motherly voice or brotherly touch or priestly anathema might ever arouse her. They had held a bitter cup to her lips, and she had meekly received it. But ONE in loving pity had loosened the earth cords which bound her, and no bolts or bars might retain the unfettered spirit. The dregs of the cup were left untasted, for Margaret had reached her Father's dwelling—better than earthly abode!

CHAPTER XXX.

THE CLOSED VISOR.

ABOUT a week of Gytha's solitary imprisonment had passed away, when one night, as she lay asleep, the door was suddenly opened, and a cloaked and hooded figure advanced slowly to her side. Gytha started up in something of fear and fluttering agitation, prepared though she had deemed herself for such a midnight call. Lamp-gleams flashed dazzlingly into her eyes, and she put her hand to her side, to still the wild beating of her heart.

"Waken, Gytha, and dress thee speedily. Hist! delay not for a moment."

Not Master Scrope's voice, but Lady Joan Cobham's. Gytha would have clasped her hand, but was put aside.

"Do as I bid thee, child. An thou dost delay, thy life shall soothly pay the forfeit."

Rapidly as might be, with trembling hands, Gytha donned such attire as she had in the chamber. The rough cloak which Dorothy had once lent her was still in her possession, and Lady Cobham folded it round her. Then for one moment they both paused, and looked in each other's faces.

"Where be I going, madame?" inquired Gytha.

"Where thou art taken. I bid thee to ask no questions, and 'twill be the safer for thee. Gytha, an thou dost see my dear lord, thou shalt give unto him my loving greeting."

"Wilt not thou come unto mine home, where perchance—" Gytha hesitated.

"Perchance I might be liker to meet him, than in a Catholic household, would'st thou say? Mayhap. But I be no Lollard, neither will I put mine own life, neither my child's, into needless peril, by sojourning among them who be enemies of my religion. I do repent for that I have brought thee hither into danger, for to work sorrow unto thyself and others. And now must I bid thee farewell, my Gytha."

A half-stifled sob escaped her, and she kissed Gytha once and again.

"I would fain tell thee thou hast been foolish and mad, yet can I not blame thee. Rather do I esteem thee the more for thy constancy, my Gytha; albeit thou wottest well *I* be no Lollard," added the dame nervously. "I did much desire that thou should'st recant—and yet—but fare thee well!"

"Fare thee well, and God be with thee, my dame," said Gytha gently.

Weeping silently, Lady Cobham muffled up her face and glided away. Gytha stood tearless and pale where she was left, till a second and stouter figure slipped in through the door.

"Be'st ready, my damoiselle?"

"Dorothy, 'tis thy cloak I have, but thou mayest find its value among mine attire which I do leave," said Gytha.

Dorothy nodded, and taking Gytha's hand, led her into the dark passage. Noiselessly they passed on together, winding hither and thither, without even a lamp to guide them. Dorothy evidently knew what she was about. Soon they reached a round corner tower and descended the steep staircase. Thence they hastened

into the court, crossing in the faint starlight to the opposite side of the castle. And there, standing beside a small postern door, was Ralph. Dorothy touched his arm, with her own peculiar low sound of recognition. He made no answer, but unlocked the door, and the three passed outside, closing it after them.

"Speedy now, my mistress!" he muttered to Dorothy. "The damoiselle had best put a good length betwixt herself and Sterborough ere the day dawneth. And thou and I had best hie us to our beds. I would not, for a king's ransom, that our part in this matter were known unto Master Scrope."

"'Tis thou, then, who hast saved me," said Gytha's sweet low tones.

"Nay, I have but a share in it, madame; but 'tis a share likewise in the peril."

She gave him her hand gratefully for a moment, and then went forward over the grass in obedience to Dorothy's touch. Much perplexed as to what they would do with her, she yet asked no questions, and only walked on with her two companions. A clump of trees near the castle wall seemed to be their destination. Once there, Dorothy drew a breath of relief.

"Methinks 'tis all well now. See here, my damoiselle."

Passing round the clump, they came suddenly upon a small group of horsemen, standing motionless in the starlit darkness—for darkness it verily was, notwithstanding Orion's shining. Gytha could just distinguish the outline of a riderless palfrey, led by the rein, and also of one horseman, somewhat apart from the others, who appeared to take the lead. He sprang to the ground when she appeared, and in unmistakably knightly style assisted her to mount. No word of recognition or encouragement however passed his lips, and he was immediately

back again on his own steed. Dorothy held Gytha's skirt for a moment.

"My damoiselle, ye be well out of yon chamber," she whispered. "By Master Scrope's will, I doubt, ye had never gone forth alive. 'Twere best now that ye do journey hence with all speed, and make no questioning concerning the manner of your escape—if indeed ye be yet escaped."

"I will mind thine avising, kind Dorothy," said Gytha softly. "And—but one word more—canst tell me nought of Margaret de Cobham?"

"Ay," said Dorothy, after one instant's pause, during which the motionless figures of horses and horsemen around might have been carved in stone. "The Damoiselle Margaret likewise hath gone where Master Scrope may not touch her."

"She too—escaped!" exclaimed Gytha. "Oh! tell me whither?"

"Nay, I wot not, save that verily 'twas an angel which did call her, so joyous was her look. Grieve not, my damoiselle; 'tis of a surely better thus. They had done her unto death in bitter wise, but that they had found her gone."

"Thou tellest me—they did find her dead!"

"Hist—none know save thou and me," whispered Dorothy. "Speak not thereof unto thy protectors. 'Tis even so, my damoiselle; and better death in sleep, methinks, than death in flames."

And then a hand was laid on Gytha's rein, and the horse was led away. Dorothy and her husband went noiselessly back to the castle, while the little band of travellers passed cautiously on, keeping as much as possible among trees till they had reached beyond dangerous vicinity to the castle. But morning had begun to dawn

before they ventured to break into a fearless open trot upon the high-road. After that, rapid advance became more important than concealment.

Gytha at first felt stunned with the news—unable to weep—unable even to think. She mechanically paid sufficient attention to the exigencies of the moment, to keep her seat and guide her horse, but beyond that her mind seemed a blank. Margaret gone! Margaret dead! Bright Margaret of Cobham, never to meet her again in this life! Alfgar's love, and her friendship, things of the past! It seemed too terrible to be true. And yet, mingling with her grief, was a deep and growing sense of relief, to think that Margaret had passed for ever out of the hands of her cruel persecutors.

Not dead, but in her Father's dwelling. Not gone for ever, but only called home a little before those who would follow! Not things of the past, but things of the future, were the broken companionship and severed friendship! A dim whisper of comfort crept softly into Gytha's heart, as she wearily rode along. The dawning of day had come to Margaret, while she was among the shadows still. But the darkest shadows in time must pass, and upon her soul too the morning should break in full and heavenly radiance.

"HE will e'en forgive thee all! He holdeth thee yet! He loveth thee yet!" Sweet words, spoken in that last interview, swept with sudden power over her spirit. For giving!—keeping!—loving!—unto the end! Why, who could doubt it? She had sinned darkly and deeply; but what sin could the blood of Christ her Lord *not* cover? Forgive her all!—ay, verily He would, most fully and completely, and take her into His arms, and shield her from every danger.

Like one awakening from a dream, Gytha gazed up at

the sparkling stars, with happy tears filling her eyes. What had come over her all at once? Doubts, and coldness, and half-hopeless bitter remorse—all were gone! What was this which had swept them aside, lightly as the autumn breeze flings the dead leaves away? Had the answer to her prayers reached her at last? Was this the pardon for which she had sought and waited and longed, and vainly striven to believe must come? Strive as she might, she had found herself powerless. She had told herself she was lacking in faith and had fought for more, all uselessly as it seemed. But at one touch from the Physician's hand the wound was healed; one whisper from the Master's lips—and Gytha could doubt no more.

It hardly seemed to her like faith—so strong and radiant the sense of loving pardon, and of her Saviour's supporting arm. Yet heaven-sent faith it was. There had been scales upon her eyes, and no earthly hands could remove them. But now that they were taken away, she saw clearly—ay, with a clearness she had not known in other days. And though Margaret was gone, and troubles thronged around her, Gytha rode on rejoicing; for the peace that passeth earthly understanding had been poured upon her soul, in richer and fuller measure than ever yet before.

Many hours that day the journey lasted, with scarcely a halt for refreshment, since pursuers might not be far distant in their track. Gytha followed the directions given to her and asked no questions, neither did her companions seem disposed to be communicative. The knight, who was in full armour, kept his visor carefully closed, and never opened his lips to speak. He rode beside her, and paid careful attention to her wants, but invited no conversation. If she asked him a question, he answered by a mute gesture of courtesy, or beckoned

to his almost equally silent esquire, to give the needed response.

So the day wore away, and evening was approaching, when a wayside inn was reached. Gytha was growing very weary, and somewhat alive to the embarrassments of her position, though the sunshine in her heart—mingled with shadow, as it was—made these matters more easy of endurance. On arriving at the hostelry, the knight sprang to the ground, and disappeared for a moment within the door. Then coming out again, he assisted Gytha to dismount, and retaining her hand still in his own led her into the building.

A goodly gathering of travellers seemed to have come together before them. The knight nodded to one or two familiarly in passing, but walked gravely through their midst, and never paused till he had conducted Gytha to a certain small chamber beyond. None save his esquire followed them thither.

A bench stood there by way of furniture, and Gytha sat down upon it. Then the knight stood in front of her, silent still, and seemingly struggling with emotion not easily to be controlled. Gytha lifted her eyes wonderfully to the bent helmeted head.

“Fair sir, I wis not who ye may be, but I do desire at the least to tender mine hearty thanks unto mine unknown deliverer.”

No answer came, as she had expected. She turned to the esquire :

“Sir, perchance ye can let me to wete of that which shall be my plan of travel, sith it meseemeth that ye be a-taking leave of me.”

“Methinks ye will find ‘tis all arranged for ye, madame,” was the answer, in the feigned yet half-familiar voice which he had addressed to her before. “There be a

company of travellers here this night, a-journeying towards Hereford, and ye in their midst shall be well guarded."

"I thank ye," said Gytha half-dreamily. "Sirs, I wot not for whose sake ye have thus saved a poor prisoner of Master Scrope, but I do trust ye will never have reason for to repent."

"'Tis for thy sake, fair maiden."

The squire spoke in his natural voice this time, and Gytha sprang to her feet with a startled exclamation. For at the same moment the closed visors of knight and squire were removed, and Sir Walter de Malmayns' blue eyes were gazing upon her with mournful regret.

She clasped her hands, turning from pale to crimson, but did not speak. Neither did he. One moment they both looked steadily at each other, and then Sir Walter bent low on one knee, and mutely pressed her hand to his lips.

"'Tis farewell, Sir Walter," she said steadily, calm and pale again. "Thou hast verily fulfilled thine behest, and saved me from Master Scrope his hands. I marvel that I guessed not 'twas thou. And now—we do part."

Lips and voice quivered a little. She drew in her breath resolutely, and went on—

"Hast thou no word of farewell to speak unto me, Sir Walter?"

"Nay," the squire made answer on behalf of his master. "Fair damoiselle, Sir Walter hath upon his knightly honour taken a solemn vow to speak no word unto ye till at the least ten years be flown. He hath desired me to make this known unto ye. Else had Master Scrope, without aught of delay, brought ye unto extremity, even unto the stake. Master Scrope would fain it had been a vow for full lifetime, and ne had not been for the time of ten

years only. 'Twas matter of debate which might yield. But by this Sir Walter did win so much of delay, and of promised gentleness in the handling of ye, that he might make opportunity for ye to escape."

"But methinks 'tis peril unto all of ye," said Gytha anxiously. "Know'st thou not, Sir Squire, that there be grievous penalties threatened unto them who do aid a convict* Lollard!"

"Soothly, by law; but methinks Master Scrope will scarce risk the turning of Sir Walter unto thy faith, by pressing of him over closely. Also, Sir Walter did sternly avow that an ye did die he would himself turn him unto your faith; and methinks Master Scrope hath been in somewhat of perplexity what to do with ye. From out the which have we even now delivered him. Likewise, we be about to depart speedily unto the king, who maketh ready for the taking of an expedition into France. Sir Walter his banner will e'en be needed, and King Harry loveth not these fiery laws, by the which e'en a faithful Catholic may burn for the holding of a kind heart unto the Lollards."

A glance from his master checked the somewhat talkative squire. Sir Walter whispered something to him, and he disappeared into the hall, only to return immediately with a stout matronly citizeness of London, journeying westward.

"Good mistress, I do place in thy hands, for all tender care and solicitude, the gentle maiden of whom I did speak unto thee," said Sir Walter low and earnestly. "Thou wilt guard her well, and ne quit her not till thou hast seen her within her dwelling. Thy meed I have told thee."

"That have ye, fair Sir. Lack-a-day! these Lollard

* Convicted.

folks be in evil wise ; but verily 'tis a right comely maiden, who winneth the heart, an one doth but look upon her. Good-morrow, gentle dame," and she curtseyed till her short petticoats lay upon the ground. " Be ye willing for to journey with me ?"

" Willing—ay, and right thankful," said Gytha.

And then a silence fell on them all again. Gytha broke it, advancing a step towards her deliverer.

" Sir Walter, methinks 'twere best we did part. The pain may not be softened by delay ; whereas thy peril is made greater. I would say farewell, save and except thou dost tarry here the night."

" Nay, madame, we do purpose for to journey onward a space," said the squire.

" Farewell, Sir Walter," she said steadily. " From my heart I thank ye both. I will ever pray for thee, Sir Walter, that God may be with thee, and may teach thee His holy truth."

Once more he bent his knee, pressed her hand fervently to his lips, closed his visor, and with one deep bitter sigh turned away. Another moment and they were gone. Gytha stood in the centre of the room, where they had left her, feeling at the moment as if her world were indeed desolate.

" 'Tis a brave knight and loveth ye well," said the good woman. " Good now, gentle maiden, weep not ; but bethink ye that one day ye will even see him again. Ah ! 'tis easy to speak comfort in words, but ye do hear nought of what I do utter," she added, seeing her kindly-meant endeavours to be unperceived. " Methinks 'twere truer pity to leave ye awhile to yourself, for to weep away your sorrow."

CHAPTER XXXI.

GYTHA'S MOTHER.

AFTER many long days of wearisome journeying, the little old home, under shadow of the stately Malvern hills, was reached—a home held only on sufferance, Gytha well knew, since the passing of late laws against the Lollards ; yet, as she drew nigh, she felt herself coming to a very haven of rest, after the tossings and the turmoils of past months. The worthy dame who had charge of her, would not pause at Sir William Cheyne's, having a friend of her own living but three miles further on, while a neighbouring hostelry served for the remainder of the travellers that night. People were not over much inclined just then to trust themselves unnecessarily within a Lollard household. Unpleasant suspicions might result. At all events, Gytha's companions were cautious, and went elsewhere for hospitality.

So she took leave of them at the gate, and passed alone over the drawbridge. How strange it seemed, to be coming back after all these years ! She remembered so well the bitter childish grief with which she had journeyed thence. Now she could hardly feel herself in any wise the identical Gytha Cheyne with that simple-hearted young girl, save in her love for the old place.

She would not have any sort of announcement made of her arrival, but greeted briefly the gate-keeper and one or

two retainers, who joyfully recognised her. Then she passed on to the hall, and stood quietly in the doorway, to look about her.

How like to old days it all was ! There was no "banquet-wise" arrangement to-day, but only one long table down the full length of the hall. At the upper end sat Sir William and Lady Cheyne side by side—he with his kind grave earnest face, and she so fair and motherly and sweet. Alfgar was busily performing his rightful office of attendance upon his parents, carving meat, supplying their trenchers, and handing the wine-cup—not often required by Sir William, who was a particularly abstemious man for the days in which he lived. Alfgar looked still exceedingly delicate and depressed ; and went through his duties in a languid mechanical way which showed little strength or little heart for them. The remainder of the household was seated at the same table, with the exception of those who waited on the rest ; while the clumsy silver salt-cellar stood marking the line of demarcation between those of gentle and ungentle blood.

Anne Tufton's voice was to be heard busily talking, amidst the general faint hum, in which those at the upper end seemed to be taking but a small share.

"Truly I wot not to what this land of ours will speedily come. Heard ye ever the like, my dame, of the things which bonny Mistress Higham did tell us a week gone, upon her journey from London hither ?"

"I wot she did tell us divers strange matters, Anne," said Lady Cheyne's clear tones.

"Of the fashions in dress, which be ever a-changing, and the money which folks do spend in needless adorning of their poor bodies. Forsooth and 'tis no marvel that laymen be thus addicted, sith the priests themselves be

clothed in most marvellous fashions which men may devise. Saith Mistress Higham, for the making of a coat or a gown for a man, so much goeth now of cloth and of fur, that speedily will the tailors be compelled for to shape their garments in the open fields, no rooms being made large enough therefor."

"'Tis but a poet's fancy which thou art a-quoting, Mistress Tufton," said Alfgar, smiling a little.

"I wot not an he be a poet or nay, but methinks he speaketh sober truth, whatsoever he be. Verily 'tis a grievous shame, saith Mistress Higham, for to see serving-men and serving-women of meanest estate, in London streets, a-dragging their long tails of sheep-skins through the foul mire, in poor imitation of them who may afford to wear fur and miniver in like foolish fashion."

"'Tis no new weakness of mankind, good Mistress Tufton," said Sir William, shaking his head. "Wottest thou not how the King, Richard, late dead, did wear one gown so weightily covered with gold, that the worth thereof was thirty thousand marks—no less! And Sir John Arundel, 'twas said, had even fifty-two suits of apparel, all of cloth of gold either tissue. What say'st to that?"

"Why, Sir William, I do say this, that 'twas evil e'en in those days, when but they of gentle blood—who might afford the same an they would—did dress in yon vain and foolish fashion. But forsooth 'tis worse in these days, when no man may ken another by his dress, and the sumptuary laws be altogether of no avail at all—sith knight or squire, or baron or serving-man, or dame or shop-lass, be all apparelled of a like smartness."

Anne Tufton's indignant protest was suddenly brought to a close. She had won so much of general attention, that Gytha had actually been able to glide noiselessly up

the full length of the hall, unperceived by any present. But at this moment, having reached the great chair on the dais, a faltering voice said—

“Mother, hast thou no word of welcome for me?”

There was literally too much bewilderment at the manner of her unlooked-for appearance, to admit of outward excitement. Lady Cheyne did not even exclaim. She gave one startled look round, then received the truth into her heart and her daughter into her arms at the same instant. “Mother—oh, my mother!” and with one half-stifled sobbing cry, Gytha let herself be folded in that tender embrace, and laid down her head upon the shoulder which had often cradled it in infancy, and felt herself once more at rest.

No one attempted to come between. All felt that the two had been so long parted as to have now the best right to each other. Servants and retainers waited respectfully, standing round the table, with pleased affectionate glances towards the fair girl, whom they had known and loved through sixteen years of life. Sir William was smiling. Alfgar was leaning on the back of the chair, with a growing whiteness round his lips. But mother and daughter remained locked together in that wordless passionate clasp, till at length Sir William laid a hand lightly upon each, saying—

“Sweetheart, the child must be weary. Gytha—wilt not receive thy father's greeting?”

She stood up and turned to him instantly, then took both Alfgar's hands, gazing at him with compassionate tearful eyes.

“I have many things I must needs tell ye,” she said. “But 'tis no place here. What will ye? Shall I go apart now, and open my tidings?”

“Nay,” Sir William answered decidedly, before Alfgar

could speak. "Thou art fasting and need'st refreshment. Sit thee down beside me, my Gytha, and joy the household with a view of thy face—so long time absent."

Gytha glanced down the table, and gracefully acknowledged the hum of welcome which came up to her.

"I care not for refreshment," she said, "but I will do thy will, my father, so that thou dost ask me none questions till the meal be over. Speak unto me rather concerning yourselves. Alfgar, methinks thou hast scarce yet gained thy full strength."

Alfgar muttered something faintly, and brought her a trencher of meat; but he was trembling so that he could hardly stand; and the hand which touched hers conveyed a chill as from ice. She looked anxiously up in his face.

"Methinks thou art scarce fit for service this day. Father, I pray thee to excuse him."

"Sit thee down, Alfgar," said Sir William kindly; but with a hoarse low apology, Alfgar suddenly quitted the hall, disappearing into the back chamber, and they saw no more of him.

Gytha's condition as to questions laid considerable restrictions upon conversation, more especially as there were home subjects likewise which might not be touched upon in public. The meal was therefore as much as possible shortened, and Sir William and Dame Cheyne, rising at the earliest possible moment, took Gytha's hand and followed Alfgar into the quiet chamber behind the hall. They there found him seated on the coffer, with his head resting on his hand. Gytha sat down beside him, simply saying—

"I will answer aught of questions, so it please ye, now we be alone."

"Concerning the Dame Cobham, Gytha?" said Sir William Cheyne inquiringly.

"She remaineth yet at Sterborough. I scarce think she will journey thence, my father. Hast thou heard aught respecting Sir John Oldcastle of late?"

"Ay, he is yet in hiding; and Alfgar, having somewhat regained his lacking strength, desireth speedily for to join him. I wot not how to refuse. Truly Sir John needeth the service of a faithful and loving esquire."

"And thou, my Gytha," said Dame Cheyne—"thou hast witnessed faithfully e'en at Sterborough; and thy Lord hath brought thee in safety through grievous peril—for peril doubtless hast thou been in!"

"Mother, He hath brought me through," said Gytha, her head drooping; "but 'tis with bitter pain and shame that I do confess I have otherwise acted, in that for many weeks I witnessed not in any wise for Christ my Lord. The whole sad story thou shalt presently hear. I do misdoubt no longer that He hath lovingly pardoned this my sin; but—O mother!—thou wilt not cease to love thy child?"

"An the Lord hath spoken words of peace unto thy soul, who be I, my Gytha, that I should dare show harsher front unto thee?" asked Dame Cheyne seriously. "Yet be I grievously disappointed, and I deny it not. I did deem thou mightest die, but I deemed never thou couldst fail."

"Nay, weep not thus, Gytha, and thou, sweet wife, grieve not a bruised heart needlessly," said Sir William. "Methinks 'tis good for all that we do learn how the weakest be strong in Christ, and the strongest be weak apart from Him. Mayhap thou hadst not learned this lesson beforetime, my child."

"Nay, father, I kenned it but in word, and not in heart. Truly I did say unto myself, as likewise my mother unto herself, that I might die, but could never yield. But I

wist not in what wise temptation should come upon my soul ; and I was taken in Satan his snare, ere I had seen it spread."

"Tis even thus he doth in all subtlety win souls, which depend not utterly upon Christ. But thou hast been kept, even through peril more dire and more deep than we in fond love had dreamt. And now, my Gytha"—he paused and glanced at Alfgar's motionless figure—"methinks there be yet another, concerning whom thy brother would make inquiry—even Margaret of Cobham."

"Nay," said Alfgar, lifting a white face from his hands, "I need not for to inquire."

"Alfgar, thou wottest not all," faltered Gytha.

"I wis the worst. Thine een did speak it unto me on first entering. Margaret hath entered upon her rest."

"Tis even so!"

He set his lips together rigidly, and gazed upon the ground. Then after a brief pause, he asked—

"How died she?"

"For the faith, and yet in peace. 'Twas a long and sore trial, Alfgar ; but the worst and darkest she had not to bear, for God did even call her gently home, and gathered her out of the hands of her persecutors."

"Tell me all—the manner of her death, and if thou didst speak with her."

It was a long story, including the history of her own fall. She gave it steadily from first to last, with little of interruption. Lady Cheyne was the only one who wept. Alfgar listened at first with his face hidden ; but at the description of Gytha's midnight interview with Margaret, and the happy faith of the dying martyr, he lifted his face, and something of almost triumphant peace settled down upon his troubled brow.

"She hath gained her heavenly meed," he said slowly, when Gytha paused. "Verily we will meet again. Ah, well I wist that day she rode away in storm and wind, that she and I should meet never more upon this earth. But yet the day shall come——"

And then he rose and left the room, to battle with his grief alone. But Sir William carried on the words.

"Ay, it shall come," he said, "when the kingdom of our Lord Christ shall be made manifested unto the world, and Satan's followers shall likewise gain *their* meed. Methinks, though sorrow, and loss, and persecutions be our lot, 'tis brighter far than theirs, sith its end shall be everlasting joy, and theirs everlasting woe."

CHAPTER XXXII.

TAKEN.

NEARLY four years had elapsed since the condemnation and escape of Sir John Oldcastle. For over three years Gytha Cheyne had been quietly living on in her childhood's home, spending her days in a peaceful routine of working, spinning, studying, Gospel reading, and caring for the poor. Meanwhile Alfgar followed the hapless fortunes of his outlawed and persecuted foster-father.

The year 1417 was almost ended, and still Sir John roved hither and thither—now concealed in the house of a friend; now hidden by his Herefordshire tenantry; now finding an asylum in the wilds of Wales, where his presence was in a measure connived at by the prince of the lands, Lord Powis. But these long-drawn-out wanderings and sufferings were nearly over.

November fogs lay dismally over the country, and crept in damp curling clouds through every chink and cranny and unglazed window of a certain battered and ruined and half-roofless old farm-house, situated in an unfrequented spot of the Powis lands. Here had Sir John for a brief space taken up his residence, with consent of the lonely decrepid old man who was its owner and sole occupant. In the outer room—a sort of apology for a hall—a small body of haggard ill-dressed men was gathered. They were Sir John Oldcastle's devoted followers throughout

his wanderings—all Lollards of course, and chiefly his own tenantry. One of his “preaching poor priests” acted as chaplain to the little camp. Sometimes, instead of being all gathered together, they were scattered widely over the country, for greater security. In this wild and desolate place, however, the dangers of discovery or attack appeared but faint.

Another and smaller room lay beyond; and here Sir John Oldcastle himself might have been seen, seated on the one broken bench, busily conning a manuscript volume. There was a worn look about the man; and the deep-lined brow and hollow cheeks told their own tale of four years’ weary battling—not battling with an outward adversary, which would better have suited his naturally martial and knightly spirit, but battling with the more bitter and insidious foes of impatience and mistrust and repining.

A slight movement near the door made him glance up. Alfgar Cheyne stood there as if in watching or waiting. Hardships and deprivations seemed to have wrought for him what the tenderest nursing had long failed to effect; and he had never from early childhood worn an appearance of more vigorous manly strength. There was more change, and that of a sadder description, in Lord Cobham, though the old quick smile and genial bearing were not wanting.

“What dost desire, Alfgar?”

“My lord, dost thou purpose for to remain longer in this place?” asked Alfgar, somewhat abruptly.

“Awhile, perchance. Wherefore nay?”

“I do scarce deem it to be safe. James Peckham saith, the Lord Powis wotteth right well thy presence hereabouts. My lord, dost thou put full faith in his kindliness?”

“Full faith do I put in none. King Harry hath taught me a grievous lesson unto the contrary. But I mistrust

not the Lord Powis. Methinks he hath kindly inclinations towards me."

"I would fain his kindly inclinations be not over strongly put unto the test."

"Thou art suspicious, meseemeth."

"'Tis said there be some in power confederating with him, my lord."

"'Tis said things divers and oft which be not sooth. I marvel thou dost lightly put faith in bruits."

"Nay, my lord—'tis a weighty matter unto me, sith I do ever fear for thee."

Sir John smiled somewhat wearily. "I fear not for myself. Soothly this life of ceaseless hiding and watching I love not. I would I might find my way unto other lands."

"Whither, my lord?"

"Whither many of our Lollard brethren do now escape. Unto France—Germany—Bohemia—I care little whither it be, so I may be free for to show my face. Mayhap one day I will venture. But 'twere an hazardous enterprise. I wot not how I might get me safely from English shores."

He mused silently awhile, then glanced up again.

"Ofttimes have I marvelled within myself what should hap unto thee, an I be one day taken and done unto death, as some desire. Didst ever consider, Alfgar?"

"My lord, I would desire nought save to die with thee."

"Thou hadst the rather and the better desire for to live unto God His glory, and for to do Christ His work, whatsoever it may be. Thou art not, as I be, condemned unto death. I do lay this command upon thee, Alfgar, desiring thee, on thine allegiance, that in such case thou dost enter upon no needless peril."

"None *needless*," said Alfgar quietly.

"As thou once didst. An I be taken, nought more remaineth unto me save to die. Thou nor no man could do

nought more for to save my life. Mayhap 'twill one day come to pass. 'Tis a thought oftentimes in my mind, that so it shall be. What deem'st thou, Alfgar, an thou didst join the king his army in France ?"

"My lord, I love not in any wise for to conjecture aught which shall involve the parting of me from thee," said Alfgar, with a slight flush. "But an thou must needs be answered—methinks 'twere somewhat as I did put mine head within the lion's jaws for safety."

"Nay, thou mistakest. So long as the king and his army be a-fighting, little leisure remaineth among them for persecuting of Lollards. They do leave that work for them who do remain behind in England. Well—thou mayest con the matter in thy mind. I have an errand for to send thee upon, this day."

Alfgar was all attention immediately. A packet of papers had to be secretly conveyed to a certain Lollard gentleman, residing some ten miles distant. Sir John explained the matter fully ; directing him to take two men for his companions, and not to attempt returning before the next morning. And then the two stood looking at each other for a moment. Neither knew that this was *the* parting so long dreaded. But in their uncertain manner of life, they never could separate without a thought of what might befall them.

"Thou hast been a good and dutiful squire, and a right loving son unto me," said Sir John suddenly, with something of moisture in his eyes. "I wot not what I would have done without thee."

"My lord—what hast *thou* been unto *me*?" faltered Alfgar.

"Verily I have led thee into divers perils and hardships. But methinks 'tis all in the good and right cause." And Sir John softly repeated the words, "'If ony cometh to me, and hatith not his fadir and modir and wyf, sones

and britheren and doughtris, yit forsoth and his lyf, he may not be my disciple.'"

"Methinks thou hast verily fulfilled that condition, my lord."

"Forsooth, ay—so far as it be needful. I hate not my gentle Joan, as man hateth, yet have I yielded her and all for Christ His sake. Verily *Hē* wotteth all!"

Sir John stood dreamily thinking, as he had become apt to do of late.

"I would say farewell, my lord. It waxeth late."

"Ay—thou hadst needs start upon thy way. Have a care unto thyself—and fail thou not to bring unto me the written answer."

And with a kindly farewell, Sir John resumed his reading, while Alfgar went away.

No long time elapsed before he started on his road, with the two men whom he had selected to accompany him. Somehow Alfgar felt heavy-hearted that afternoon. The thick November fog was depressing, and as he plodded through the lonely ten miles' walk, unbroken by voice or sound of man, his spirits sank to zero. He was glad when his destination was reached, and a cheery fire and warm welcome made him feel that there were bright spots as well as dreary tracts in this world. But he thought often of Sir John in his cold and lonely and half-ruined dwelling, and started early to return upon the morrow.

Coming near the old farm, he failed to see the signs he had expected of the party he had left. His companions uttered wondering conjectures, but Alfgar only pressed on silently with a foreboding heart. Presently the old bent figure of James Peckham rose slowly up from amongst some bushes, and came tremblingly to meet them.

"Hath aught ill happed unto Lord Cobham?" asked

Alfgar, in fear. "Speak, I beseech thee,"—and he grasped Peckham's shaking arm. "Where be my lord?"

"Alack-a-day!—I wot not where he be now," said the old man, shivering with cold and fright. "But well I wot whither he shall be speedily taken—even unto London city. I thought to be even caught likewise, but did hide myself in safety ere I was perceived."

"Thou! Who careth for *thy* wretched life?" And then Alfgar checked himself, and spoke gently. "I pryythee pardon me, but I scarce wis what I be a-saying. Lord Cobham taken! Oh, tell me nay!"

"Thou hadst best enter, and hear all which I have to tell thee," said Peckham, moving towards the doorway. "Ah me! 'tis a bitter cold day, and maketh mine old bones for to ache. Enter Master Cheyne, and put questions concerning what ye will."

Alfgar stood in front of the little fire, unconsciously warming one of his chilled hands, and asking—

"How came the matter about?"

"Soothly I be so crazed and terrified, I wot scarce aught. But 'twas little over an hour sith ye three were gone, when I—being on yonder hillock—did note a body of men on horseback, advancing hither. Mine heart did fail me, and I wist not what for to do, sith thou knowest, an I had been caught, I too had mayhap suffered grievous penalties. And sith it is for love of Lord Cobham, and in no wise for love of your religion, that I have thus sheltered ye awhile, I desire not for to die as a Lollard."

"Didst thou give no warning?" asked Alfgar sternly.

"Ay, that did I. Speedily did I haste me unto the back of mine house, and called in through the window of Sir John his chamber—'There be horsemen a-coming for to take ye.' Then, as Sir John did start to his feet,

I made off speedily unto a certain hiding-place—the which I show not ever unto any man—and did lie there a-listening."

"Couldst thou see nought?"

Peckham nodded, with a little twinkle in his eyes.

"I did see the horsemen approach with full speed, in brave attire, and the men descended unto the ground, and made demand at the door for to enter. 'Twas a while ere they might obtain an answer; but they had well surrounded the house, and I wotted well, as did they, that Sir John might not escape."

"Get thee on with thy story, good friend," said Alfgar restlessly, when he stopped to cough.

"Prythee patience, Master Cheyne—I be old and nigh breathless. Howbeit, when Sir John did find 'twas useless for to keep silence, he did hold parley; but they would have nought to say, save that he must yield himself, and that for an outlaw they might offer no terms. 'Then ye may even come hither and take me.' Sir John made answer, and said no more.

"'Twas no easy matter for them to do as he had bid them. Verily Sir John and his folks did fight bravely; and methinks King Harry hath a loss, in that so great a man of war goeth not with the army unto France. But they did struggle lustily—the one party for to enter, and the other party for to defend mine house against them. I wot not how the matter had ended, but that one did lift a stool and throw it at Sir John, and he did fall. Thereupon his folk did yield or flee, and Sir John was laid in a litter, being sorely hurt, that he could not stand."

"How looked he?" muttered Alfgar.

"How looked he? Like unto one who should not speedily be again free. Verily they did guard him in right careful wise."

“ Nay, but his face ?”

“ ’Twas ever a marvellous calm and steadfast face, as thou wottest. Ah me ! well-a-day !” and the old man sighed heavily. “ Truly have I loved Sir John ; but methinks his tale be well-nigh told. What purpose ye for to do, Sir Squire ?”

“ Firstly for to travel unto mine own home, and thence with all speed unto London. An his tale be nearly told, I will e’en see or hear the ending.”

CHAPTER XXXIII.

ANOTHER BATTLE FOUGHT.

PALE and weary, troubled and mud-bespattered, Alfgar Cheyne strode into the hall of Sir William's manor. He was alone, having parted with his two companions. Anne Tufton looked up, and gave one faint shriek at his unexpected appearance.

"Mistress Tufton, I give thee greeting. Where be my lady-mother?"

"Methinks in the soler—nay, perchance, in the garden—or mayhap——"

"Bethink thee speedily, Mistress Tufton. Not an hour have I for to lose."

Anne Tufton brushed up her slumbering memory immediately.

"Nay; an thou art so mightily besped, and may not stay for to make known unto me thy tidings, soothly I did see her awhile since pass into yon chamber, but I ken not whether she hath likewise passed out again."

Alfgar took the shortest method of settling the question by opening the door himself. Lady Cheyne and Gytha were seated together within, busily working and softly conversing.

"Alfgar!" and they started up to greet him, but noticed anxiously his careworn hopeless look. "What hath come unto thee?" they both asked.

"E'en that which we have long dreaded. Sir John hath been taken."

He sat down, and rested his face on his hands, and groaned aloud. Gytha laid her fingers lightly on his shoulder.

"Think'st thou there be no hope in any wise?"

"In no wise whatsoever."

"Tis grievous! How came the matter about?" asked Lady Cheyne sorrowfully. "Twill go nigh for to break thy father's heart."

"My father! He hath not been to *him* that which he hath been unto me," said Alfgar passionately. "Oh, would I might die for him! Dost thou marvel to see me escaped hither, when my lord be taken?"

"Nay; I could in no manner mistrust thee, Alfgar," said his sister quietly.

"My lord had e'en sent me from him with a billet unto one whom he kenned—distant many miles. When I did return next day, Sir John was taken and gone. Lord Powis hath right treacherously granted him for to be in hiding on his lands, only for to sell him at last, and gain the price they have evilly set upon his head."

Alfgar sighed heavily as he spoke.

"What purposeth thou next to do?" asked his mother.

"To journey straight unto London—if so be I may once again cast eyes upon his face."

"Thou canst do nought for him. Were't not safer thou didst remain away?" she asked, with motherly anxiety.

"Nay; that could I in no wise endure for to do. The last of him I will see. After that, I care not what shall hap unto me."

"For my sake and for Gytha's thou wilt not thrust thee into peril?"

"Nay, gentle mother ; thou need'st not to fear," he said, smiling sadly. "I wot well I have no right for to cast away my life, howsoe'er I do little value it. My lord hath likewise laid upon me his parting command, for that I do enter upon no needless peril. And on his behalf nought remaineth for to be done. Mayhap an King Harry were in the land, I would look for some relenting from his kindly heart ; but he be away, and the bishops will work their unmolested will upon Sir John."

"Thou wilt not start this day, Alfgar ?"

"An I do delay I may miss altogether the one look at his face for which mine heart craveth. My journey hitherward upon foot hath been but slow. I do purpose for to journey hence on horse—my father consenting thereto—with none but faithful Jack Tufton for my servitor."

And Sir William coming in just then, the news was told, and the request eagerly preferred. He hesitated at first, but at length gave way, though not without pressing the conditions that no unnecessary risks should be run.

"And thou wilt return hither, after—afterward," he said, hesitating how to explain himself.

"Ay, doubtless—afterward !" repeated Alfgar bitterly. "After that they have worked their vengeance upon him."

Jack Tufton and the two horses were speedily in waiting. Alfgar only delayed to make some change of clothing, and to take a little refreshment. Then with sorrowful farewell greetings, he mounted his steed, and rode away—leaving those at home to watching and waiting, almost more painful in kind than his own suspense and grief. He had at least the excitement of hourly change, and constant pressing towards a goal. Theirs was but the unvarying monotonous course of daily life,

with nothing to break the weight of sorrow which had come or was coming upon them.

Alfgar's ruling sensation throughout the long and toilsome road, from Herefordshire to London, was the fear of arriving too late. He knew that there was not likely to be much delay, either in the transportation of Lord Cobham to London, or in his execution. But it seemed as if everything ran contrary to his desires for a speedy advance. The first day his horse fell slightly lame, and had to be used with care, and allowed much rest. Next day the poor creature was so much worse that delay at a hostelry became unavoidable. The day after he was somewhat better, and they pushed on—but with some imprudence, for before night Alfgar was compelled to mount the other horse, and allow Jack Tufton to lead his own. Chafe as he might, it was impossible to make more speedy advance.

Another day's waiting at a hostelry convinced Alfgar that the horse was unlikely to mend at present, so he found a place of shelter for it, and hired another for the journey. But just as he was congratulating himself on a rapid accomplishment of the remainder of the way, a more serious misadventure befell them both. Jack Tufton was preparing for the next morning's start, when the new horse took an opportunity to fling out his heels, and stretch poor Jack helplessly on the ground, with more than one broken rib.

Alfgar was nearly distracted between his passionate longing to reach London, and the utter impossibility of leaving his faithful retainer, unattended and in suffering, at a lonely miserable little wayside inn. No single halting-place on the journey could have appeared more unfortunately adapted for such an accident, than this particular one. Jack Tufton's unselfish and urgent request

that Alfgar would ride on, and never mind about himself, only made decision more difficult. The inn was situated in a wretched little hamlet, somewhat out of the beaten track, where Alfgar had gone to avoid the presence of a certain inquisitive travelling priest, who had seemed somewhat disposed to attach himself to the young esquire and his servant. Alfgar wished now that he had not taken fright so easily. Almost anything would have been better than this delay.

Three days he remained where he was, schooling as best he might his own intense impatience, and ministering to poor Jack's wants. By that time Jack showed some symptoms of improvement, and Alfgar succeeded in finding an old woman, who was able to take his place, in the capacity of nurse.

Regardless of the dangers of solitary travelling, he then pushed on alone, as quickly as might be. Necessary caution, and various untoward obstacles of a minor description, seemed still to conspire together to hinder his advance. But at length the tedious journey neared its conclusion, and the great city was in sight.

With a sinking heart, in dread of what he soon might hear, Alfgar rode quietly through the gate. Where to go first for information he hardly knew, and he was proceeding slowly through a narrow street, with his eyes fixed thoughtfully on vacancy, when a clear manly voice cried—

“Halt, sir squire! A word with ye, an ye please.”

Alfgar straightened himself suddenly, and grasped his loosened rein. A knight was standing almost before him in the road, with rich short mantle, golden spurs, and jewelled sword-hilt. Alfgar returned his steady gaze, but could discover nothing in the face which was familiar to him.

"A word with ye, sir squire," repeated the stranger.
"Dismount and follow me."

As squire, Alfgar had no choice but to obey the knight's command. He sprang to the ground, and walked a few paces after the other, till a certain door was reached. Alfgar paused a moment, to say—

"Whither lead ye me, sir knight?"

"Thou shalt know. Follow in hither."

A small and empty chamber was on the right-hand side of the passage. Alfgar left his horse in charge of a passing page, and went in without more ado. The knight deliberately shut the door, turned round, and stood looking earnestly at Alfgar.

"Sir knight, I pray ye pardon, but I have urgent business on mine hands, and no time for to lose."

"Wottest thou my name, sir squire?"

"Nay, verily, do I not."

"Hast seen me ever before?"

"Certes, not to my knowledge," said Alfgar,

"Thou speakest sooth. Neither have I seen thee. Nethetheless thy name is cleped Cheyne."

"Ay," said Alfgar.

"I kenned it!"—and the stranger's face flushed, and his lips almost trembled with agitation. "Master Cheyne, didst thou ken one ever—somewhat like to thyself, but the fairest of maidens, gentlest of damoiselles—whose name was cleped Gytha?"

"'Tis mine own sister," said Alfgar.

"I wotted it must be even so. None save brother and sister were ever so marvellously alike in visage. Seggen to me concerning her."

"She is well," said Alfgar briefly. "Sir knight, an thou speakest concerning my fair sister in such wise, I have verily a right in all courtesy for to demand thy name likewise."

"Canst not conjecture? I am even cleped Walter de Malmayns."

The truth flashed across Alfgar in a moment. "Nay; I marvel I guessed not. But I deemed thou wert in France."

"Soothly there have I been, and thither must I speedily return. King Harry did send me home a brief space, and for me 'twas a well-chosen time. I rejoice to have seen thee, Master Cheyne."

"And I thee, for that I may but thank thee heartily, that thou didst once save my gentle sister her life," said Alfgar. "I would fain thank thee again more fully awhile hence. But at the present moment I be grievously pressed for to discover so soon as may be, what they have done concerning—"

"Concerning whom, Master Cheyne? Perchance I may help thee."

"I need not to fear that thou wilt betray me," said Alfgar. "I would say, concerning Sir John Oldcastle."

"Ha!" Sir Walter changed colour. "Thou wert once his squire—most favoured of all, I did hear."

"Once, and unto the last. None other have I served."

"Thou canst not speak with him," said Sir Walter gravely. "I wot not how to tell thee all."

"Then I be too late; and they have done him even unto death."

"Nay, not so," said Sir Walter. "He liveth yet—albeit—"

"Sir Walter, I prythee, proceed. I would fain and speedily hear all."

"He hath been taken before the lords for judgment. Somewhat concerning the matter was even told me, though I wot not all. 'Tis said they did read to him his former condemnation, and ask of him to say—an so he could—

wherefore he should not die. And he, in place of defence, did speak concerning mercy and judgment, and desire for to have mercy shown him, sith judgment rightfully appertaineth unto God. But I wot not how far it be sooth which I was told, neither this nor other things which 'tis said he uttered. This only I wot, neither will it be matter of surprise albeit of grief to thee—that they did determine the speedy execution of his sentence once passed."

"Upon what day, Sir Walter?"

One moment Sir Walter was silent, and then said gently,—"He liveth yet. I did tell thee thus. But on the morrow—nay, on this even—will Sir John Oldcastle live no more in this life."

"This day!" Alfgar turned wildly to the door, and would have unheeded commands or entreaties to remain, but that the knight's strong hand laid a detaining grasp upon his arm, which he could not disregard.

"Master Cheyne, 'tis my pleasure in no wise to lose sight of thee. The folks be already a-wending their way unto the place, and I had promised me by no means to go thither, sith I love not to see a brave knight die in such wise. But if thou needs must go, then will I even go with thee."

Hardly knowing what he said, Alfgar consented. Sir Walter directed a follower of his own to see to the horse, and then walked rapidly on by Alfgar's side towards the scene of execution. Not at Smithfield this time, but at St. Giles', where Sir Roger Acton and others had died before.

The crowd was gathering and gathering—no mere careless throng of spectacle-gazers. Sir John Oldcastle was widely known and deeply beloved among the people. Many came sadly and solemnly to look upon his death, and to take a lesson unto their own hearts therefrom.

And presently through the mass of heads there was a

stir, and a parting asunder to make a lane. Alfgar stood not far from the gallows, half concealed by a small clump of bushes, and Sir Walter was close beside him. No one noticed them. All eyes were directed to the brave confessor, seated, like the veriest traitor, upon a hurdle, with his hands bound behind him, as he was slowly drawn towards the spot where he should die. Not traitor-like or in felon-wise was that bright and happy face, wasted indeed with long endurance, but stamped with the light of heaven's own joy, upon which he was so soon to enter.

Ay ; the battle was nearly over, the victory nearly won ! Arriving at the spot, and being taken from the hurdle, he knelt down, and prayed earnestly aloud, that his enemies might be forgiven. Then he stood up, and looked round on the assembled crowd, and spoke words of strong warning to them all—pressing them to take the Word of God alone for their rule and guide, and to follow no teachers but those whose lives might be found in conformity with the life of Christ their Lord. Longer than this he went on, but what his words were, Alfgar did not hear, for a dark mist seemed to have settled down upon sight and hearing, and those clear emphatic tones, so loved by his heart, carried no meaning to his brain. He stood like one in a dream—quiet and upright, yet almost unconscious of what went on around him.

Once or twice the mist lifted slightly. He saw the gallows—a strong cross-bar fixed upon two stout posts, with chains hanging from it. He caught a glimpse of certain men fastening Sir John to these chains, so that he was suspended almost horizontally, with a pile of logs below. Then presently the fierce crackling of wood broke upon his ears, as the flames gained power, and rose upwards. And now and then the familiar voice of Lord

Cobham reached him, praising God through bodily anguish to the last. And then—silence!

Suddenly the mist was gone. Pale as death, but with a strange composure, Alfgar looked around. Sir Walter was standing still beside him, motionless and absorbed. The crowd was slowly breaking up. A little way off, the red tongues of flame were rising upwards still, sending out forked tips, curling caressingly round something above them—something—but *not* Sir John Oldcastle.

A deep sigh of relief broke from Alfgar. “I wist not I could ever say it from my heart, but methinks our Lord in taking him home, hath helped me likewise. Soothly ‘tis well even so. Never more may they grieve nor harm him.”

“I marvel not that thou didst love him, Master Cheyne. ‘Twas a brave and noble spirit.”

And then they went to Sir Walter’s home together. And Alfgar slept heavily and peacefully that night. There was a strange restfulness in the thought that Lord Cobham had passed at length beyond the reach of his enemies. They had done their worst. They could do no more. The prisoner was free, and the conquered was the victor.

To Alfgar himself life seemed to have lost all object and joy. But the next morning Sir Walter said to him simply—“Master Cheyne, wilt thou follow my banner into France, and be mine esquire and friend? Methinks I can do much for thy protection, and thou wert safer there of a surety than here.” And Alfgar, with the remembrance of Sir John’s parting advice, accepted the offer without hesitation.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

ENDINGS.

MANY years of mingled light and shadow passed quietly away, when, one afternoon in the spring of 1424, Gytha stood busily making pastry, with bared arms and huge rolling-pin, in the hall of the manor. Much as she had disliked household work in early girlhood, she was a thorough adept at it now, though books still held a foremost place in her inclinations. A fair and graceful woman was Gytha, verging closely upon thirty, with much of quiet dignity showing through the quick dexterity of her movements. She did not look so very much younger than her mother, Dame Cheyne, who was just then whipping eggs vigorously upon a bench near the fire. Anne Tufton, with two floury hands, was close by, patiently awaiting further directions.

"Methinks 'twill be a right stormy night," said the dame presently, ceasing her somewhat fatiguing operations and starting up. "Hearken unto the wind—how it doth howl and cry."

"I love not the wind in such sort," observed Gytha. "It recalleth ever sad memories concerning things in the past."

"I wot not verily which memories thou meanest, Gytha."

"Neither wis I—altogether," said Gytha dreamily, as

she rolled the pin lightly to and fro. "But it singeth right dolefully unto mine heart, till I could sit me down and weep for sadness."

"For me, I do deem the present somewhat sadder than the past," said Lady Cheyne, sighing. "Nigh upon two years be gone, and no word hath reached us of thy brother. My heart oft faileth me for him. Mayhap he likewise hath fallen a victim."

"Nay, I think not—I believe it not," said Gytha quietly. "Bethink thee, my gentle mother; an aught of evil had happed unto him, Sir Walter of a surety had letted us to wete of the same."

"Ay—if so be Sir Walter himself be yet alive and in health," said Lady Cheyne; "whereas no word hath reached us of him neither."

"Nor is not like to do so, save through Alfgar," said Gytha, laying down her pin. "Methinks thou may'st take this from mine hand, Mistress Tufton, while I do gather some flowers in the garden."

Anne Tufton acceded willingly, and Gytha went out of the door, singing softly to herself, and tying a hood over her head. It was a chilly and blustering afternoon, yet though grey clouds hung low, no rain had begun to fall. Gytha hesitated a moment whether after all to go, before she decided to venture, but somehow she felt more disposed just then for flower-gathering than tart-making.

So wrapping her mantle around her, she sped lightly away to the manor garden, and soon grew absorbed in the engrossing occupation of selecting and cutting the prettiest blossoms. A dainty nosegay for her mother was always her first care, and then she filled her basket with a goodly supply of spring beauties. Just as the brim of the basket was reached, a heavy drop came down on her face from above, followed by a second and

third, and then by a perfect rush of water and wind—in bucketfuls and powerful gusts. Gytha was nearly swept off her feet, but she gathered up her basket and her energies together, and walked rapidly back to the house.

Entering the hall door, with flushed cheeks and dripping apparel, she found herself close to two other figures, about as wet as herself, and muddy with pedestrian travel. Lady Cheyne was bestowing a dignified welcome upon them, and offering full hospitality. Gytha shot a quick glance of scrutiny, as she passed to her mother's side. They appeared to be men in early middle life, and were dressed in a sort of rough pilgrim's guise, with huge hoods drawn so far over their heads as nearly to conceal their features. Both "louted" somewhat awkwardly as she approached, and Lady Cheyne remarked—

"These two worthy men be overtaken by the storm, my Gytha, and do crave a night's lodging. They be full welcome. Sit ye down, good men, and shortly shall supper be ready."

"Mother, I will e'en change my robe, sith I be somewhat wetted," said Gytha.

Lady Cheyne assented, and followed her to the door. "Thy father hath not returned. I do fear me he will even sleep out the night. I marvel who these men may be, Gytha."

"Know'st thou nought concerning them?"

"Nay, for nought did they seggen. 'Tis easy for to see their lack of gentle blood. I do fear me they be mayhap folks whom 'twere better not have within mine house. How think'st thou? Mayhap they be Catholic priests in disguise."

Dame Cheyne shivered as she spoke. "Nay—I trust nay," said Gytha soberly. "But an there be danger

thereof, soothly 'tis well my father be absent. I will speedily return, my mother."

She quickly removed her gown and donned another—then descended again to the hall. The table was now being laid, and Dame Cheyne had taken her seat in the chair. Gytha sat down beside her, and there being no other visitors that day in the house, the two strangers occupied the next positions. Old Rogers, when he brought in the huge salt-cellar, looked sharply at them both, and then placed it above them, undoubting their plebeian birth. Gytha fancied she caught a sly amused glance from one to the other, but was not sure. She did not like the way they kept their hoods pulled forward, and their heads bent, and their eyes cast down ; neither did their slow cautious gliding manner tend to allay her anxiety. *Could* they be disguised priests indeed, come to take cognizance of the heresy existing in this peaceful little abode, and determined with fire or sword to root it out?

"Have ye journeyed far?" she asked, wondering if it would be possible to discover whether there really were any ground for her fears. She obtained no reply; and looking at the one nearest to her, she repeated the question.

"That have we, gentle dame," was the answer in a smothered tone. "And be marvellous hungered thereafter."

"Do ye purpose to remain in this part of long time?" asked Dame Cheyne.

"Forsooth and that can I in no wise tell ye," he responded. "Mayhap we will even journey next unto Germany."

"Germany!" repeated Gytha. "Thine inclinations be somewhat barbarous, methinks."

"Nay," said the other speaker. "'Tis not matter of tastes but of prudence, fair dames. These be no days for living in England, an a man will think either read for himself."

Only one interpretation could be put upon these words; but Lady Cheyne asked distrustfully—"Wherefore then comest thou hither?"

"'Tis for a purpose. After that this my purpose be fulfilled—in one wise or another—I will e'en bid farewell unto the shores of this realm. I marvel greatly, Dame Cheyne, that ye have been thus long unmolested."

"Methinks our little nest here be e'en forgotten," said Lady Cheyne, looking steadily at him. "Good sir, I wis not wherefore ye do speak thus—neither whether ye be a
—a—"

"Ye need not to fear, madame. Wherefore should we conceal from ye that which we be? 'Tis even for Lollardy that we do leave our land, elsewhere to roam."

"Ye do deem that peril waxeth greater?"

"Verily so long as King Harry of noble memory did live, his gentle heart loved not for that men should suffer and die at the hands of men for matters of belief. 'Twas said e'en Lord Cobham had been spared, but for that King Harry was in France. But in his absence they did do that noble confessor unto death; and now, with a feeble infant on the throne, there be none left for to restrain the bloodshed."

"Thou didst ken Lord Cobham?" said Gytha eagerly.

"Nay, I exchanged never a word with him, but my friend did ken him right well. A great and brave spirit forsooth was his."

"Ay," said the other huskily. "Fair damoiselle, hast thou heard aught——?" Gytha's involuntary glance of dignified surprise made him add hastily—"I pray ye

pardon. Have ye heard aught, I would say, concerning the Dame Joan of Cobham?"

"Soothly, ay," said Gytha. "'Twas no so long a while after Sir John his death, that her castle and lands and manors were fully restored unto her. Likewise she hath consoled herself for Sir John his death by wedding of a certain Master John Harpden."

The traveller on Gytha's side checked an impatient exclamation, and only asked—"Of what degree?"

"I wis not. No knight is he, though doubtless of gentle blood."

"'Tis the fifth in number," muttered the traveller. "The first his name I ken not. Second, Sir Reginald Braybrooke; third, Sir Nicholas Hawberk; fourth, Sir John Oldcastle, of noble memory: fifth, Master John Harpden."

"Ye do speak sooth," said Gytha in surprise. "But how wot ye?"

"'Twas told me—concerning the former names," he answered. "Know ye aught of the younger Dame Joan, fair damoiselle?"

"She hath been wedded no long while since to Sir Thomas Brooke, of Somerset."

He nodded. "Ay; 'twas as a page in Coulyng Castle that I did know him."

"Wast thou in Coulyng Castle?" asked Gytha in surprise. "Mayhap and I have even seen thee, yet I recall thee not."

"Mayhap," was the answer, as if the stranger were not particularly desirous to prove the fact. "Can ye tell me aught of the Dame Alianore Cobham?"

"Nay," said Gytha absently, looking hard at him, for a strange conjecture was creeping into her mind. Had it occurred to Lady Cheyne, the good dame would have

started and exclaimed and demanded to know the truth. Gytha simply glanced round, and said—

“ Roger, methinks thy wits be at fault this day. Remove speedily the salt-cellar somewhat lower.”

Roger obeyed, and Gytha asked composedly, though with a bright pink spot on either cheek—“ How be it, sirs? Methinks the present be the rightful ordering.”

“ An ye will,” said the two together.

Gytha bent a little towards her neighbour. “ Fair sir—sith I deem ye both of gentle blood—didst thou once ken a gentle maiden—daughter unto the said Dame Alianore?”

A deep uncontrollable sigh answered her. She rose from the table, and clasping his hand, cried eagerly—

“ Mother, ‘tis our Alfgar returned unto us once again!”

The hood was tossed back, and Alfgar himself, dropping his slouching manner, stood suddenly erect,—a changed and older man by many years, since they had last seen him—older in face than in age, with deeply lined brow and sunburnt skin. Mother and sister welcomed him each in her own way—both sobbing a little with joy over the returned wanderer, while the retainers crowded round to give eager greetings. But all this while the other traveller remained motionless and unnoticed upon his seat. Gytha suddenly remembered him, and turned curiously in his direction.

“ Fair sir, I wis not who ye may be,” she said. “ But for Alfgar’s sake ye be welcome—an ye be his friend.”

The stranger rose, and came in front of her.

“ Gentle maiden,” he said in a constrained tone,—“ dost thou recall a certain day, upon the which thou wert in deadly peril, and a certain vow was taken for the saving of thy life?”

Gytha turned pale. “ Ay, that do I,” she answered steadily.

"Wittest thou how many years it be since that day,
fair maiden?"

"'Twas e'en ten years, but yestere'en."

"Thou hast forsooth kept count of the same," he answered. "My vow have I kept, fair maiden, but I in no wise have changed. Wittest thou me?"

He too put back the sheltering hood, and once more, as long ago he had done, he knelt on one knee in knightly fashion, and kissed her hand.

"Sir Walter de Malmayns," she said in clear low tones.
"'Tis even thyself—and thou be welcome."

The little side interlude was still unperceived, and he seized on the opportunity to end his own suspense without delay. "Thou didst question, gentle Gytha, whether I would long remain here. 'Tis for thee to decide. Wilt thou go with me unto the barbarous land of Germany—or elsewhere, an it be safe?"

She hesitated one moment.

"Thou hast spoken as thou wert a Lollard," she said.
"An it be sooth——"

"Dost thou doubt? Dost thou marvel? Truly have I beheld enough and enough of the other side, and have faithfully obeyed thy command for to examine and see in the Gospels, seeking the truth of God. Ay, and verily have I found the same. Wilt thou fear to adventure thyself with me, albeit life for us twain may ever be perilous unto the close?"

"Soothly I fear it not," said Gytha, with her sweet confiding smile.

THE END.



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